



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 131

(28 September 2020 to 18 October 2020)

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Assembly Members

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

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Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
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Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)
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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)
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Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)
Dolan, Ms Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)

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Ennis, Ms Sinéad (South Down)

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

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Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)

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

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Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)

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

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Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)

O

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O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)

P

Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)

R

Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
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Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
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Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sitings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 September 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before I move to the first item on the Order Paper, I want to make the point that Standing Order 18A(2) requires written copies of statements to be made available at least half an hour before the statement is delivered in the Chamber. The Justice statement arrived in at 11.37 am, so, being a little bit late and given the topicality of the issue and the fact that it is the first item on the agenda, I propose to suspend the House for 10 minutes in order to give Members an extra few minutes to read what is, I think, a 10-page statement.

The sitting was suspended at 12.02 pm

The sitting resumed at 12.12 pm.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed with the first item of business on the Order Paper, I just want to —.

Mr Gildernew: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to draw your attention to an issue that arose in the Chamber last Tuesday. Mr Allister made assertions about me that were completely unfounded and untrue. When he realised that I had not attended the Thomas Clarkes game, he made further assertions, which were equally unfounded and untrue, that I had attended a public gathering. I ask that those assertions be withdrawn and apologised for unequivocally in the same manner in which they were made, and I would like the Speaker to rule on that issue.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that point of order, Mr Gildernew. I will consider that later today and I will come back to you and/or Mr Allister, if needs be.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I understood that I had apologised to Mr Gildernew about the false allegation. I believe that the record will show that I withdrew it and apologised.

Mr Speaker: I have just said that I will consider the matter and return to it later.

The First Minister will take questions for oral answer today on behalf of the Executive Office as the deputy First Minister is unwell and unavailable to attend. I extend our greetings and best wishes to the deputy First Minister.

Ministerial Statements

Legislative Error Resulting in Invalid Convictions for Sexual Offences

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Justice that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that in the 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 still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called, but they can do that by rising in their place as well as notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. In addition, I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for a full debate and long introductions will not be accepted.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I apologise to you and to Members that the statement was late in being issued to you this morning. There was no discourtesy intended but there was a drafting issue at our end, for which I also apologise.

12.15 pm

Members will be aware that, on 22 September, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) announced that the convictions of 15 individuals for certain sexual offences prosecuted between 2009 and 2017 are to be set aside as a result of a historical legislative error that caused them to be invalid. Before I set out how this occurred, first and foremost, on behalf of my Department and the criminal justice system, I want to express my deep regret that it has happened and to apologise to the victims who are at the heart of it all.

Since taking up my post as Justice Minister, I have endeavoured to improve the experience of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system. That motivation is at the core of the changes that I am driving in the Department. I am acutely aware that, because of this error, some victims are receiving news that is bringing them to revisit past issues that are painful and personal. That is a matter of profound regret. I know that they are being assisted throughout this difficult time by Victim Support and by Nexus. I am grateful to both those organisations for working closely with the Public Prosecution Service in supporting them.

The individuals whose convictions are being set aside were tried and convicted in the Magistrates' Courts. However, a technical change in the law, made in error and prior to the devolution of justice, meant that a small

number of sexual offences could only be prosecuted in the higher Crown Court. The removal of certain sexual offences from a schedule to the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, by the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, and earlier legislation in 2003 meant that the Magistrates' Courts lost the legal power to try those cases. Since 2009, 15 prosecutions, resulting in convictions covering affected sex offences committed between 1973 and 2009, were sent to the Magistrates' Courts in error. All were convicted without the necessary authority. As a result, the Public Prosecution Service will shortly be making an application to the courts to have those convictions rescinded. In effect, it will be as though the conviction never happened.

There are 17 victims of those offences: 14 are victims of indecent assault on a female, contrary to section 52 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861; one is a victim of indecent assault on a male, contrary to section 62 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861; and two are victims of the offence of unlawful carnal knowledge, contrary to section 5(1) of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885. Each and every one of those victims had the right to expect better from our criminal justice system. Those convicted received sentences that stretched from fines and community service orders to suspended sentences and probation orders, with one receiving a custodial sentence. I should stress at this point that there is no question of any of the cases resulting in a miscarriage of justice.

Article 45 of the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 permits the summary trial of a small number of indictable offences, with the consent of the accused. In other words, selected offences can be sent to the lower Magistrates' Courts, which have lesser sentencing powers and do not involve juries. The offences that can be dealt with in that way are listed in schedule 2 to the 1981 Order.

Members will be aware that these issues relate to legislative changes that predate the devolution of justice matters. Consequently, it is not possible to be certain of all the circumstances. As I understand it, in 2007, Northern Ireland Office (NIO) Ministers wished to consolidate sexual offences law into one statute and align offences and penalties with those in England and Wales. That resulted in the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, which was prepared over a seven-month period between October 2007 and April 2008.

During the preparation of the Order, a number of sexual offences were replaced and, consequently, the pre-existing offence was repealed. One such offence was the section 52 offence of indecent assault on a female. The repealed offences were removed from the list of offences contained in schedule 2 to the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, as a consequential amendment in the 2008 Order. That meant that offences committed prior to 2 February 2009 could no longer be tried in a Magistrates' Court.

Normally, draft legislation includes supplementary, consequential, transitional and saving provisions. All but a saving provision was included in the 2008 Order. The removal of section 52 from the 1981 Order, without provision for summary prosecution for historical offences, appears to have been an unintended drafting error. There is no recorded discussion or correspondence specifically on the subject of removal of those old or repealed offences from schedule 2 to the Magistrates'

Courts Order. There is a very limited record, which indicates that forewarning was given to the police and the PPS of the policy intent to repeal all existing sexual offences, apart from the trafficking offences, which were to remain in the Sexual Offences Act 2003. A record exists of an enquiry made in December 2007, at the request of a legislative draftsman, specifically asking whether either organisation perceived or identified a reason not to proceed in that way. In the limited records available, nothing was received that indicated or highlighted the need for a saving provision to retain summary prosecution as an option for offending conduct covered by the repealed offences but which occurred before the proposed order came into force.

All new legislation goes through a process whereby Ministers set the policy direction, policy officials draft instructions to counsel, which are then checked by legal advisers, and the legislative counsel then prepares the actual legislation. The legislature that scrutinised the legislation, prior to it becoming law, was the Westminster Parliament. In this case, it is clear that the consequences of the changes made to the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 were not identified by any of these people or organisations. The draft Order was made in Parliament on 9 July 2008 and the relevant parts of the Order were commenced on 2 February 2009. After the legislation was passed, the PPS, relevant judiciary and legal representatives all proceeded in the belief that the Magistrates' Court option was available for suitable cases — normally those of a less serious or grave nature, and where the more limited sentencing powers of the Magistrates' Court were deemed to be appropriate. The issue was raised in 2012, when it was concluded that a saving could be implied. However, that approach was reviewed in 2018 and, following further legal advice, it was determined that that was not the case.

The PPS contacted DOJ officials in early 2019 to say that they had identified that there was a potential problem with the removal of section 52. At this point, it was unclear whether there was a significant problem or not, and the PPS sought the advice of counsel. The focus for the PPS at that time was on whether future proceedings for offences contrary to section 52 could be brought in the Magistrates' Court. Following receipt of this advice, it was concluded that the Magistrates' Court did not have the legal power to try historic indecent assault offences that were committed prior to 5 February 2009, the date of the commencement of the 2008 Order, and that all future prosecutions for indecent assault could only proceed in the Crown Court. The PPS subsequently sought further advice from counsel on the validity of the convictions obtained in the Magistrates' Court after section 52 had been removed from schedule 2. Having received and considered that subsequent advice, the PPS concluded that the convictions could not stand and steps had to be taken to set them aside.

The PPS also carried out an exercise to identify all of those cases where it had prosecuted section 52 offences since 2009. An initial search of its database produced a large number of cases that were potentially affected. These had to be reviewed manually to confirm the correct position in respect of each of them. My Department was informed by the PPS at the end of February 2020 that the further work done had clarified that there was a definite problem and identified the cases affected by the removal

of section 52. They also noted the need to explore whether any of the other offences removed from the schedule had had prosecutions undertaken since 2009. The PPS also explained that it had instructed staff not to issue any new prosecutions summarily for the affected offence.

Senior management in the Department were alerted to the issue in early March 2020 and engaged with the PPS about the steps that needed to be taken as a result. At that point, the plan was to take all necessary steps by the end of June 2020, but the lockdown for COVID-19 led to some delays. The Department's legal advisers carefully considered whether any other offences were similarly affected and further offences were, indeed, identified. This, in turn, led to a further scoping exercise by the PPS to establish whether summary prosecutions had occurred. This identified one conviction under section 62 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 and two convictions under section 5(1) of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885. The PPS also carried out an initial evidential review of the cases identified as it was recognised that fresh prosecutions could still be brought by the Crown Court. Any fresh prosecution will be made in line with the PPS test for prosecution, which involves an assessment of the prospect of a conviction and the public interest in bringing the offence and offender before a court. An important aspect of that will be the views of the victims themselves on what should happen next.

The initial review was commenced by a senior prosecutor in the PPS and will be completed when all relevant information, including the views of the victims, is available. It would be inappropriate for the PPS to conclude the review of the cases without having taken the views of the victims or before the existing convictions have been set aside.

In advance of contacting the victims, PPS asked for the PSNI's assistance in establishing the current addresses for victims and defendants, so that the victims could be contacted to confirm their up-to-date details and to take their views as to how they wished to be contacted, including whether by letter, in person or by email. PPS recognised the sensitivities involved in this initial contact, particularly with victims. Clearly, it is critical in a situation like this to have the full picture of all the potential difficulties. Both my Department and PPS were concerned that the removal of repealed offences from schedule 2 of the 1981 Order, without a saving provision, may have occurred for other offences and, consequently, the Department commissioned a legal audit to identify other, similar problems. The audit identified a further 11 offences that had been repealed and removed from the schedule, including a further two offences that were removed as a consequence of repeals in the 2008 Order. Some offences were removed as a consequence of repeals dating back a number of years. Only one other offence was removed from the relevant schedule of the Magistrates' Court order, without policy intent, and that occurred in 2003. The list of offences identified was forwarded to PPS at the end of April 2020.

In May, a search of the PPS database was conducted for prosecutions under the additional repealed offences. At the end of May, PPS informed the Department that it had completed the analysis of the number of cases that had been inappropriately prosecuted in the Magistrates' Court and would further review the case files to confirm where

action was required. Two additional section 5(1) offences were identified and are included in the total of 15 affected cases.

I was first alerted to the issue on 16 June. I was advised of the current position: PPS had confirmed that there was a problem regarding the prosecution of a number of historical cases and it was reviewing case files and considering options on the best way forward. In August, my officials met with PPS who advised that, while the review of case files was continuing, they were developing plans to inform victims. PPS indicated its intention to engage with Victim Support NI and Nexus NI to gain their advice on how best to engage with victims and to ensure that those affected could be given effective support and counselling throughout the process. Their overriding aim was to minimise any distress or re-traumatisation of victims. PPS also indicated that it would seek the views of victims before undertaking the public interest test. No decisions on re-prosecution of the defendants would therefore be taken until sometime after it had informed victims and given them time to digest what has happened.

Following an update on the meeting, I spoke to the Director of Public Prosecutions on 20 September. Like PPS, my main priority was, and is, to ensure that victims should be protected. I am grateful to Victim Support and Nexus for supporting this work. They have been most helpful in assisting with the communications that issued to victims, and stand ready to support any victims who need advice, support and counselling through these difficult times.

Shortly after my conversation, PPS confirmed that its final review of cases had confirmed that there were 15 cases, involving 17 victims. Once confident that all relevant convictions had been identified, PPS began the process of notifying victims and defendants last week. The senior prosecutor responsible for reviewing the cases personally telephoned the victims to advise them that the convictions of those who had committed the offences against them were no longer valid, and that a letter would be delivered by courier the next day, setting out the circumstances in greater detail. Whilst he was not able to reach all the victims to speak to each one of them, letters were delivered to 15 out of 17 victims the next day. Efforts to contact the remaining two victims are continuing. He advised those victims he spoke to that he was happy to meet them and discuss the situation, and its implications, once they had time to consider the letter in detail. Some of these meetings are already arranged, and it is expected that more will follow. Victims were also advised that Victim Support and Nexus were available to help, and named contacts were provided.

I appreciate what a shock it must have been for the victims of these offences to receive this news and I sincerely regret that they have had to go through this process. I realise that there has been some criticism of the delay in addressing the error once it had been recognised.

12.30 pm

Once the error had been identified as a potentially serious problem, there was a series of steps to be taken to assess the situation. I have set those out in the statement. It was critical that, at the point of announcement, the full extent of the problem was established and that the PPS had identified precisely which cases, and which victims, were affected. A premature statement could have created

unnecessary concern and distress for a wider group of victims who, ultimately, would not have been affected.

As I said, my first concern is the victims who have been affected by this error. I am assured that mechanisms that the PPS has put in place will support them, and I have asked one of my senior officials to keep a watching brief on developments and to keep me fully informed. The Department has also instructed the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) to prepare a clause in the forthcoming justice (miscellaneous provisions Bill) to reinstate the relevant sexual offences to schedule 2 to the 1981 Order where the offending conduct occurred before 2 February 2009.

This error is most unusual. I have therefore asked one of the Department's senior lawyers to prepare an analysis of the factors that might have contributed to it and to develop a quality-assurance check mechanism that can be built into our policy and Bill development processes to cover all future legislation. I will provide that analysis to the Justice Committee when it has been concluded.

I understand that the PPS is also reviewing its practices and procedures in relation to the introduction of the 2008 Order and what followed and that it will bring a briefing on it in due course.

The cases that I have referred to today are, to the very best of our knowledge, and after considerable research, all those affected by the error relating to pre-2009 cases left off schedule 2 without the saving clause.

I started this statement by emphasising that my primary concern was for the well-being and protection of victims affected by this error. I trust that the efforts of the PPS and of my Department to support and assist victims in these difficult circumstances have assured Members that we are taking victims' welfare very seriously. It was right that we worked through this matter carefully to ensure that we established the full facts and that the PPS was able to engage with victims when it could provide them with detailed information and answers to their concerns.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): My concerns are, obviously, first and foremost with the victims, who will, undoubtedly, have been re-traumatised as a result of this failure. I want to put on record my appreciation for the Minister coming to the House today. I also acknowledge her apology. The Minister was not responsible for this error, but she is responsible for how it is addressed.

I am disappointed that it was the Public Prosecution Service, rather than the Minister, that was first out on the issue last week. I believe that, as she is head of the criminal justice system, her Department should have fronted on this, particularly in light of the PPS's statement that indicated a failure on the part of departmental officials.

That said, the statement raises even more questions. The issue was raised first in 2012 and then again in 2018. Although it was confirmed as a definite problem in February 2020, senior management was told about it only in March of this year, and the Minister in June. I am shocked that it was June of this year before the issue was elevated to the Minister's desk. Therefore, the announcement that a departmental lawyer is to carry out an analysis of the factors and to quality assure it does

not cut it. At a minimum, we have to have an independent investigation and accountability clearly taking place.

The Criminal Justice Inspection (CJI) should be called in by the Minister to investigate her Department on the issue, because public confidence has been undermined and needs to be restored. Therefore I ask the Minister to reflect on that request.

Mrs Long: Mr Speaker, there are a number of issues that we need to unpick. First, as people will be aware, it is not as simple as me taking control of these issues. The Public Prosecution Service is entirely independent of the Department of Justice; we have absolutely no locus or vires to speak on its behalf on any matter. Therefore, it was entirely appropriate that it should have been the organisation to raise the issue, because the error was a prosecutorial one, and whether or not that prosecutorial error could be traced back to an omission in the legislation is a separate, and different, point.

The error was about prosecutorial decisions, and the decisions that will be taken henceforth will also be taken by the PPS and not by my Department. I also gently remind the Member that not only did it not just happen on my watch, but it did not happen during the devolution of policing and justice. It is not as simple as saying that my Department will have lost the confidence of the general public; that is an unfair representation of the facts.

The Northern Ireland Office made these changes to the law. As with any Order in Council, it will have been scrutinised at Westminster and many other parties in the Chamber will have had MPs at that time who will have had an opportunity to take part in that scrutinising process. Indeed, this legislation will have been formulated at the Privy Council, and some parties may well have had members in the Privy Council at that time who failed to pick up on this process. I think it is a bit much to say that confidence will be lost in the Department of Justice.

We take this entirely seriously and appropriately, and we have handled it in the proper way. However, for us to speak before we knew all the facts would have placed more victims in danger of being distressed than was absolutely necessary and that, for me, had to be the primary concern in all of this.

Ms Dillon: Like the Members before me, I thank the Minister for coming to the House with this ministerial statement. I had tabled a question for urgent oral answer, but I am grateful that a ministerial statement has been made. Obviously, we got the statement a bit late and that makes it difficult for us to ask questions. However, I want to place on record that our deepest thoughts are with the victims. This will have had a devastating impact, not only on the victims but on their families. When something like this happens, it does not just impact on one person: it impacts everyone around them. Our thoughts are with them, and I am glad that they are getting support. I hope that the support will continue and that they will get all and any support that they need during this process.

Can the Minister outline how she will ensure that justice is upheld in those cases where it has been decided not to pursue fresh prosecutions? How can we minimise the impact on the victims of those cases where there are new prosecutions?

Mrs Long: As I made clear in the statement, it is unfortunate that the convictions in question are to be set aside. However, the veracity of those convictions is not in question. Obviously, this creates a significant issue for the victims of those crimes. We are currently trying to support victims with the trauma around this decision. Victims' views will be taken into account by the PPS when it comes to the point of deciding whether the offences should be re-prosecuted.

In many of the cases, people will already have served their complete sentence for the offences, and that will also have to be taken into consideration when a decision is made about whether to re-prosecute. There are a number of complex decisions that need to be taken, but those decisions will be solely for the Public Prosecution Service. They are not decisions that I can be involved in because that would bring a political element to the prosecution, and that would be entirely unacceptable.

We have discussed with the Public Prosecution Service some of the issues that flow from this about other elements of public protection. We have worked through those other elements to provide reassurance that public protection is not being compromised in these cases. Nevertheless, it is correct to say that, if victims decide that they wish to go forward with a re-prosecution, and if that is the final decision of the PPS, they will need Victim Support and the other agencies to support them through that period.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for coming here today and making the statement. I also want to put on record my thanks to Victim Support and Nexus for stepping up.

I note the timeline, and I notice that the change happened in 2009. The issue was first raised in 2012. It is not clear how the issue was raised in 2012 or by whom. Was that at a departmental level? It was further raised in 2018 and, alarmingly, it took until 2020 before it arrived on the Minister's desk. If the Minister does not intend to include CGI in an investigation, what level of investigation does she intend to seek at this time?

Mrs Long: There are a number of issues that we need to address. First and foremost, an error was found in 2018 when a court official undertaking routine work with ICOS, the court record system, came across an anomaly. So that is when it was established in 2018.

A record was labelled as hybrid — that it could be tried either summarily or on indictment — whereas it should have been triable only on indictment according to the ICOS schedule. The Courts and Tribunals Service raised that with the PPS, and the error was then identified, albeit that it was not immediately clear whether it was a significant issue. The honest answer is that I do not know how it was found in 2012, but, at that time, the PPS was advised that it was not a significant issue that would cause any concern, which was why it was then in abeyance until it was rediscovered in 2018.

In terms of the length of time that it took to come to me, I have set out in detail the amount of work that had to be undertaken and also the responsibilities for that work. The issue is that it was not brought to my attention until the views of the Department were integral to being able to move that forward. We then worked quickly to identify whether there were any other potential issues around that particular section or other parts of that Act to ensure that we were not going to go public with something that would

have a drip effect, with more cases coming forward over a period of time. I understand that it is very difficult, and I am giving as full and frank an account as I can.

You asked about an inquiry into the issue and how that will be handled. We have conducted a full inquiry. My focus is now on ensuring that we will be able to prevent a recurrence. The problem is, of course, that I am giving as full and frank an account as I can of what happened in 2007, 2008 and 2009. Many of the individuals involved in those original decisions are no longer available. The Northern Ireland Office no longer has responsibility for justice; we now have a new Department. Many of the individuals who would have been there originally doing the scrutiny are no longer in politics. It is quite difficult to establish with any more certainty than we already have. I do not believe that further inquiry into the matter would necessarily yield additional information. We are very clear about what happened, but not why. We are acting to ensure that that cannot happen again and that we minimise the risk of any repetition. Those are the two most important things that we can do at this state of remove from the original events.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for giving us the statement. This is as bad as it gets. Without a doubt, our thoughts have to be with the victims who will have been re-traumatised by the serious error. The statement is littered with mention of victims being first, but the reality is that the PPS knew about it in early 2019, your Department knew about it in February 2020, you were told in June 2020 and yet victims were not told until September, only days before the media were told. They were not even given the opportunity to come to terms with what happened. Those delays are due to a slow, labouring justice system that is not fit for purpose. Is the reality not that the PPS and DOJ ensured that they had minimised reputational damage before releasing it and putting victims first?

Mrs Long: I really fail to understand the tone of the question that has just been asked. I have explained in detail why it took so long to reach the public domain. It was clear, once we spoke to some victims, that there would be a risk of it going straight to the press. Therefore, it was important that we spoke to all victims simultaneously so that no victim would find out via the press what they should be told individually and privately, with time to digest it. The reason that it was not spoken of publicly had nothing to do with reputational damage to my Department.

Let us be clear: my Department was not involved in the incident. The suggestion that we would put reputational damage to the Department ahead of victims is a scurrilous thing to say in terms of my approach. It took time because it was a novel error. It was not clear whether that error would affect the vires of the Magistrates' Court in those cases. It had to seek senior Crown counsel in the PPS to ensure that it would. A complex process was then required to identify cases where there may be an unsafe conviction and to make sure that no other similar errors had occurred.

Any suggestion that there was undue delay is genuinely unfair on the PPS and, I have to say, on my officials and my Department.

For any Member of the Assembly to say that the justice system is simply no longer fit for purpose on the basis of 17 convictions, however serious, having to be set aside out of the thousands of convictions is really an unhelpful public

message to give. It is a very limited and very clear error that happened. We are accountable and are being held to account for it, and that is right. We are also informing the public of it, which shows that the justice system is fit for purpose, because there can be no better test of the justice system than for it to admit its mistakes when it gets it wrong.

12.45 pm

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for the statement, which deals ably with the seriousness of the problems but addresses the fact that they originated in a time prior to the devolution of justice powers.

I ask the Minister what actions the Department of Justice might be able to take now. What considerations are being given to whether offenders can seek compensation for being convicted in the wrong court? If they can, would that be fair?

Mrs Long: It is my intention that, if any of those who were convicted by the Magistrates' Court — correctly but in the wrong court — were to seek in any way to be compensated for loss, we would resist that compensation claim. We do not believe that these are cases in which the offences were not committed or that there was a miscarriage of justice where people who were found guilty who were not guilty; we believe that people were simply found guilty in the wrong court. We will therefore resist robustly any attempt by those who were involved in the incident to seek compensation in future.

Mr Frew: Our hearts go out today to the victims of these crimes, and they are in our thoughts and prayers. The failures of the NIO, past and present, are of no surprise to any of us in the House. We are here to discuss the here and now, however, Minister, and it is clear from your statement that you were first alerted to the issue on 16 June. Even though departmental officials knew as early as 2019 and even though the PPS contacted DOJ officials again in March 2020, you, as Minister, were informed three months later. Is that because it was convenient for the Justice Minister not to know this? If so, what does that say about the transparency and accountability of this place to Northern Ireland? Then, having been fully informed, the Justice Minister takes a further three months to address the issue in the House. What does her failure to provide the House with the transparency and accountability that is so badly needed and that so badly needs reform say?

Mrs Long: With respect to the second part of the question, I make no apology for not bringing this to the House before today. I respect the House, and I respect its Members, but my first priority was the victims, so, with all due respect to the Member, I believe that they had to right to know before he had the right to know. It was on that basis that I made the statement today.

On how long it took for it to be brought to my attention, I ask Members to remember that, in 2019, it was identified that there may be an issue. If you read the statement carefully, you will see that I was notified when there was an issue and we were clear that there was an issue. The investigatory work was undertaken, but I was notified at the point at which we knew that there was an actual problem. Remember that, previously, the advice that had been given was that it was not a problem. Further senior counsel advice was sought. When I was made aware of

the problem, the reason that it took me three months to come here is all set out in the statement. It was important that we knew exactly how many victims were affected; that we knew that we had checked for similar errors; and that we were able to say with confidence that we had been able to contact all the victims affected. That is the correct way for us to handle such issues.

The Assembly has a crucial role with regard to scrutiny and accountability, but the justice system is ultimately accountable to those who pass through the courts. First and foremost, it is accountable to the victims and to the perpetrators and to ensuring that we deliver justice. That had to be the first priority. As soon as those were indicated and dealt with, I was in a position to come to the House to make the statement and to answer questions. To have done so pre-emptively would have meant that victims would potentially have been in anguish, not knowing whether their case was affected, or, alternatively, hearing in the House, through broadcast media, that their case had been affected. I am sure that the Member, on reflection, will agree with me that that would have been an absolute travesty.

Ms Rogan: When does the Minister intend to have discussions with victims to assess whether they want to go through the stress of fresh prosecution proceedings?

Mrs Long: Because of the nature of the offences, I am not aware of the victims' names or details, and it would not be appropriate for me to be. The Public Prosecution Service, along with Nexus and Victim Support, will have discussions with individual victims about their cases. The Public Prosecution Service will weigh the views of victims against all of the other prosecutorial tests that they need to make before they decide whether the prosecutions will be taken forward again. However, it will be with the consent of victims that they will discuss their views and give the appropriate weight to that as they move forward. To be clear, I will not be part of those discussions, nor would it be appropriate for me to be.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for coming here to make the statement. Can the Minister give an assurance that proper processes and procedures will be put in place to stop the recurrence of this critical breakdown in the legal system? A proper quality management system would have stopped this failure and reduced the risk of such a major incident.

Mrs Long: I absolutely believe that it is vital that we have a system in place that checks for such things. I do not think that there one person in the House who would demur from the truth of the fact that there is less opportunity for scrutiny and less clause-by-clause consideration of Bills during the periods when we have no devolution. To put it in context, most Orders in Council are dealt with as secondary legislation at Westminster. At most, they will get an hour and a half on the Floor of the Chamber, and it will simply be a yes or no to the Order in Council. It will not go through a Committee Stage or the scrutiny that we would give that Order, but that will become primary legislation in Northern Ireland. There is an issue, and it is one of the reasons why I am so reluctant, even where it may speed things up, to ask Westminster to legislate on our behalf. By bringing the legislation here, to the Assembly and through the Committees we ensure that there is clause-by-clause consideration. That is not to say that it is impossible that such an error could happen again, because, of course,

human error can happen. The PPS are doing work to review their procedures and practices, and the Department are doing work with regard to seeing that we have a continuing clause for historic offences where we are rescinding or replacing legislation. All of that work is being undertaken. I am at a loss to recall any similar error getting through the system since the devolution of justice, but I am absolutely determined that lessons will be learned.

Ms Dolan: I, too, thank the Minister for coming here. Is it true that one convicted sex offender has been removed from the sex offenders register as a result of the error? If so, can she indicate what steps are being taken to mitigate any potential risk to the public?

Mrs Long: The risk to the public was clearly the first question that was on my mind when we discussed the number of victims and what would happen, and it is important that we look at that carefully. As you are aware, with regard to the cases in question, there remain two individuals on the sex offenders register. The rest, to the best of my knowledge, have been removed because of their time on that register. I think that there was only other person, and it was to do with their time, but I will confirm that with officials.

There are safeguards, so I want to run through them. These will be removed from the Police National Computer database and therefore would not longer be automatically disclosed on an Access NI check. Two further safeguards are available in those circumstances. First, if the individual had been barred from working with vulnerable groups as a result of that conviction, the bar would stand and would be disclosed by Access NI checks. Secondly, the police intelligence database searched by Access NI would highlight information that was available about those individuals. Access NI would then refer the application to the police, who have the statutory authority to release information for inclusion in the certificate, even where a conviction has been set aside. The chief police officer must reasonably believe that information to be relevant to be included in the certificate. Therefore, checks and balances are in place to ensure that, as a result of this, the public will be protected.

The PPS has also carefully reviewed all of the cases, which are historical and date back to offences between 1973 and 2010. The question of risk is also one of the factors that the PPS will have to consider when making decisions about further prosecutions. Two of the offenders are still on the sex offenders register and will go off it when the prosecutions are rescinded, which will be around a year or so before they otherwise would have done.

Mr Chambers: I concur with the Minister's remarks in her statement about her first concern being for the victims. Have the Minister's departmental officials been able to establish an estimated cost to the public purse of potential compensation claims from the offenders, who will, perhaps, exploit unlawful detention claims, and the cost of a package of retrials? I appreciate that, in answer to Mr Blair, the Minister gave a welcome assurance that the Department would robustly resist any such claims, but the fact is that claims from offenders will probably end up being financed and funded by the public purse, and it appears, on the surface, that they would have a strong case. I hope that they are resisted. Do any of the cases fall outside the statute of limitation for retrial?

Mrs Long: I will start with the final question. It is not my understanding that that would be the case, but we can confirm that in writing to the Member, if that would be helpful.

The 17 offences, which, on conviction, resulted in penalties ranging from a £250 fine to one custodial sentence, will be rescinded in due course. As a consequence, any of the offenders could seek the return of fines or any compensation ordered to be paid to victims, and they may use the courts to seek compensation for their conviction. As I said in response to John Blair, my Department will robustly resist any such compensation claims and indemnify victims returning any compensation awarded.

I am conscious that the error that led to the convictions being rescinded was technical and did not affect the conduct of the cases. I understand that more than half of those convicted pleaded guilty. With the cases rescinded, the convictions will be struck down and the offence removed from the offender's criminal record. It is a matter for the PPS to apply the prosecutorial test, as would always be the case, to determine whether there should be further prosecutions. The consideration of cost will not form part of that determination.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for coming to the House, although it is regrettable that there was no indication on Friday that she was coming to the House about the matter. Perhaps it is as a result of questions for urgent answer being submitted that she has come. However, will the Minister confirm if her officials or PPS officials have been in discussion with the PSNI to establish whether there are any risks for offences currently being investigated or being prepared for submission to the PPS?

Mrs Long: My understanding is that there are no such cases, because the issue with these offences was around historical offences that predated this, and I intend to add the historical element back in through the Miscellaneous Provisions Bill. Therefore, were any historical convictions to come forward now, they would know to prosecute them in the Crown Court, so there would not be the same issue.

Mr McGuigan: As others have done, I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber. I note her determination that lessons will be learned.

I also note from her statement that she has asked a senior lawyer in her Department to prepare, for future legislation, an analysis of the factors that may have contributed to this. Are there any remaining legislative problems as a result of the changes that led to these convictions being rescinded? If there are, how will those problems be resolved?

1.00 pm

Mrs Long: As part of the work that it is doing at the moment, the PPS is looking at its policy and practice around the implementation of this piece of legislation, and also other pieces of legislation, to ensure that there are no other errors that have been missed in this way. Because these are prosecutorial decisions, the Department will not have sight of that, though we will be aware where pieces of legislation have been rescinded. That is one of the reasons why I have asked someone in the Department to look at providing a mechanism that will prevent similar changes from being made without the appropriate alerts being sent to those who are actually responsible for the prosecutions.

As of today, we are confident — as much as anyone can be — that we have identified all of the cases affected by this particular issue. Obviously, as I say, there will be a review in the PPS and a review in the Department to ensure that there is no repeat, but also, on the very slim chance that there may be other, similar cases, we will look at that, but it will not be in relation to this particular issue.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, how will the rescinding of these convictions affect the Access NI records relating to the offenders, and will possible future employers be told?

Mrs Long: In respect of Access NI checks, this is obviously going to have an impact in the sense that the convictions will no longer be on record. However, as I explained, there will be the opportunity for the —. They will not be on the police national computer database, so they will not be automatically disclosed. However, if the individual was barred from working with vulnerable groups, that barring will still stand. Secondly, the police intelligence database search will flag it up if there is any information about an individual, in addition to a conviction, that needs to be considered, and that will allow the Chief Constable in question to make that information available to Access NI if someone is applying for a job with those checks.

We believe that there are protections there. Obviously, we would prefer that those convictions did not have to be set aside, but unfortunately in this case we believe that they will have to be set aside, and therefore my concern is that we do not create any risk to public safety as a result of that choice.

Mr Beggs: The Justice Department seems to be problematic. It cannot even deliver a written statement here on time, and we are having to disrupt our sitting. I welcome your decision to allow more time for us to read the statement before asking questions.

This debacle has resulted in 17 victims being re-traumatised. Our actions should be focused on the victims, and also on protecting the public. The Minister has indicated that she is bringing forward a new justice (miscellaneous provisions) Bill. Will she be bringing it forth so that it can act retrospectively and not only correct this action for future cases, but also apply retrospectively to put this right, to avoid re-traumatising victims, to protect the public and to avoid considerable cost to the public purse in running additional court cases once more?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question and can reassure him that the Justice Department does not have particular problems. This problem does not stem from the Department of Justice. I hope that the Member will be reassured by that.

I can confirm that my Department did look into, and seek legal advice on, a retrospective fix to this particular issue. While there is a presumption against retrospective legislation, it can be achieved by deliberate legislative action through primary legislation. However, such a course would have to be assessed for its fairness, and any such legislative change would not be deliverable before 2022. It would have been unconscionable to sit on the issue for a further 18 to 24 months, and the PPS had a responsibility to advise defendants and victims of the situation and move quickly to resolve it. Consequently, a retrospective amendment would not have helped. However, it is our intention to reinstate these matters back into the system, as it was never intended that these offences would not be

able to be tried in the Magistrates' Court. In the interim, offences will still be able to be tried in the Crown Court.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her comments so far. I was struck by those that she has just made about Access NI. She said, I think, that she believes that it would provide a degree of protection. However, there are no safeguards or guarantees in that, particularly as it is outwith the normal legislative process. Therefore, will she take full accountability and responsibility in the event that safeguarding is not provided despite what she believes?

Mrs Long: To be clear to the Member: we have checked, and I am stating clearly that there are two safeguards available. First, if the individual was barred from working with vulnerable groups as a result of their previous conviction, that bar would stand and be disclosed by an Access NI check. That is the first safeguard.

Secondly, the police intelligence database search by Access NI would highlight that information was available about those individuals. Access NI would refer the application to the police, who have the statutory authority to release information for inclusion in the certificate even where a conviction has been set aside. The chief officer of police must reasonably believe that the information is relevant and ought to be included in the certificate.

The Member is, therefore, asking me to take responsibility, first of all, for a decision that is made by the Chief Constable, over whom I have no authority on operational matters, and for a decision that is taken by Access NI with regard to the screening process. What I can say is the factual situation with respect to what is in place. What I cannot do is tell the Chief Constable of the day how they should proceed and whether they would judge those issues to be pertinent. I would, however, find it hard to believe — as, I am sure, would the Member — that they would not find those issues pertinent in the context of someone's applying for a job, particularly if that job involved access to vulnerable individuals.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber. My thoughts are with the victims of those crimes who are affected by the error. I hope that the Minister agrees that it will come as a further blow to trust and confidence in the system by victims and wider society. We must accelerate the Gillen review's recommendations as part of that. Have victims been assured about the safeguards that are in place with regard to those who may have been on a register, as the Minister discussed earlier? What conversations has she had with the Chief Constable on the matter?

Mrs Long: I have had no conversations with the Chief Constable on the matter because it is not a matter for the Chief Constable. I have had conversations with the PPS in order to determine that we give victims all the information that is required. I had a lengthy conversation with the Director of Public Prosecutions about the need to protect victims from additional distress, and also the need where it is necessary, when the prosecutorial test has been undertaken, for those decisions to be re-prosecuted where that was in victims' best interests.

It is important that Members recognise the limitations of the Justice Ministry. I cannot direct the Public Prosecution Service. There may be those who wish that I could, but I cannot. Neither can I direct the Chief Constable. Again, there may be those who wish that I could, but I cannot.

What I can do is have discussions with them and put victims at the heart of what has to be done. That is what I have sought to do.

I absolutely concur that we need to move forward on Gillen. That is why we have an implementation plan, which is being shared with the Committee. That is why, as part of the miscellaneous provisions Bill that is due to come to the Committee, hopefully, in the new year, we will focus very much on taking forward the Gillen recommendations, because I recognise that, of all offences, sexual offences cases are some of the most sensitive and difficult that we will ever have to deal with in the system. They are also complex and, often, take a long time to resolve. That in itself can be traumatising to victims. When we end up in a situation like this, where people have been through the process and, then, find that those convictions are overturned, it is yet another reason for people to be anxious about bringing forward their case.

I want to reassure victims that, out of all the cases that have been tried, this was a very unique and specific error. I ask Members to caution themselves before they try to make it sound as though the whole justice system is in disarray. You do victims a disservice when you go down that road. This was a very specific and narrow issue, which occurred before the devolution of justice. There is no evidence that a similar issue has occurred since. People need to take some degree of balance and perspective for the sake of victims if for no one else.

Mr Allister: Minister, you said that the Department conducted a full inquiry. In your statement, you said that the issue was raised in 2012. However, you told the House that you cannot tell us by whom, or with whom, it was raised in 2012. If you know that it was raised in 2012, surely you must know who raised it, and with whom and with what consequences.

Secondly, is there any DNA which will have to be removed from databases as a result of this?

Mrs Long: With respect to 2012, the issue was first raised within the PPS, not the Department. I do not know who within the PPS raised it or with whom they raised it. I suspect that at this stage that many of those individuals are no longer there. That is my understanding. My Department has undertaken a review of legislation because that is where we can undertake a review. We have the information available to us to be able to feed back into this and to make sure, for example, that when the PPS were notifying victims, that they considered all other potential offences that might have been caught up in this error.

With respect to 2012, I do not have information on who said what to whom at that time. Information before that period is even more scarce. I suspect that it would be held by the NIO, if it is even held at all.

In respect of DNA on the database, that will have to be reviewed. No DNA would be removed before decisions are taken as to whether or not these cases are to be re-prosecuted. That is something that will have to be looked at in the round.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. This is a grave error. We pursue criminal justice not least to provide closure for victims of crime. Unfortunately, this has opened up a very sore wound for them. I ask the

Minister to consider compensating them for their loss for the pain that they have suffered and that they will also suffer in the conclusion of this process.

Can the Minister clarify the purpose of the clause in the forthcoming justice provisions Bill? Is she concerned that there is a vulnerability within the system and that this is to protect from any future mistakes?

Mrs Long: First of all, if a victim decides that they want to pursue compensation as a result of this they will, of course, be free to do so. The normal processes will apply and they will have the support of Victim Support NI to be able to pursue that option. With respect to why we are adding it back in, the reason that we are doing it is that there are good grounds as to why some offences, which attract lesser sentences, may want to be tried in the Magistrates' Court because it is a quicker route to sentencing. It is not that we believe that we are closing down a potential for further error, it is simply that we believe that that particular route may be a swifter way to access justice for victims. Therefore, it was never intended to be removed from the PPS to enable them to do that. It is better that we put it back in place for a swift administration of justice.

Mr Speaker: No other Members are indicating that they would like to ask questions. That concludes questions on the statement. Members, please take your ease for a few moments.

1.15 pm

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

Public Expenditure: 2020-21 COVID-19 Economic Recovery Assessment

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to update the House on the latest set of allocations aimed at addressing the evolving COVID-19 situation and the need for economic recovery.

Since my statement to the Assembly on the June monitoring round, further funding of £762.2 million has been made available to the Executive from the Treasury. Funding has also become available as a result of revised assessments of earlier COVID-19 allocations. The Department for Communities has surrendered £4 million of funding in relation to its COVID-19 Supporting People programme response due to the use of existing funding to provide that support and lower-than-anticipated PPE costs. The Executive previously held £2.2 million for their contribution to a ferry operator scheme run by the Department for Transport in England. Latest indications are that the cost will be £0.35 million, thereby releasing £1.85 million for reallocation. In addition, as a result of recent departmental assessments, some £30.9 million of capital DEL has been made available for reallocation.

I want to provide an update to the House on allocations made over the summer period. Due to the evolving situation and the need to provide support as expeditiously as possible, the Executive allocated £123 million of funding on 13 August. That set of allocations enabled schools and further education facilities to reopen safely, provided apprenticeship places and supported social enterprises. Two limited allocations were made on 11 September, reflecting the urgency of additional higher education places and PPE for the education sector as schools reopened.

Following a meeting of the Executive last Thursday, further allocations totalling £165.2 million have been agreed. Given the concerns around waste management and the need to meet pressures resulting from increased landfill and waste management costs, DAERA has been allocated £11.4 million to support those key services. Local councils have been at the forefront of vital recovery services despite experiencing a reduction in their income. Councils will also play a key role in economic recovery, and in recognition of that, £40 million has been allocated to the Department for Communities to support councils. Given the severe impact of COVID on the arts sector and the need to support the reopening of venues, £29 million has been allocated to the Department for Communities for cultural recovery. That is in addition to £4 million that was previously allocated for the cultural resilience fund and means that the Executive have provided £33 million to support that sector.

The Executive recognise the need for further support for businesses, and, in recognition of the ongoing hardships faced, the Department for the Economy has been funded to support a number of initiatives: £8.5 million for assistance to business, to encourage new businesses, help retain employees, attract FDI and boost the screen industry and games sector; £8.4 million for skills and youth training, to ensure that young people can continue learning and employers have access to people with the skills and qualifications needed to recover and grow their businesses; £9.9 million for tourism, to support tour

operators, promote the North as a tourism destination and assist businesses to adapt to changed market conditions; £5.8 million for university R&D, to replace and protect jobs and help universities to focus on the research needed to fight the outbreak and support the economic recovery; £1.9 million for air-route support, to develop air routes that are critical to economic development; and £1.4 million for energy, and that funding will implement a demonstrator project to kick-start the hydrogen economy.

Those allocations should all help to spur economic recovery. The Executive have allocated £8 million to maintain a safe environment for schools through to March 2021, with a further £1 million to help preschools meet the additional costs of reopening.

Young people's education has been affected by COVID-19, and an allocation of £0.2 million has been made to support children with additional and special educational needs.

An allocation of £1.6 million was made to the Department of Health in relation to the track, trace and protect app. The mobile app was launched on 30 July to support the Public Health Agency (PHA) contact-tracing programme and help to minimise the spread of COVID-19.

Given the winter pressures identified by the Department for Infrastructure and the need to ensure that key transport corridors are accessible during the winter months, the Executive allocated £5 million for the Roads Service to provide vital gritting and gully-cleaning services. The £14.8 million capital allocated to the A6 demonstrates the Executive's commitment to delivering this vital dual carriageway between Belfast and Derry. That allocation will ensure that delays in construction, caused by the COVID-19 lockdown earlier in the year, will now be made good. Members will be aware of the limitations to development being caused in many areas by historical underinvestment in waste water infrastructure. The £15 million capital allocation to Northern Ireland Water will provide investment to upgrade sewers, waste water treatment works and pumping stations.

Full details of all allocations since August are set out in the tables that accompany this statement.

Following the latest round of allocations, the Executive retain a central fund of £55.2 million to be held for further sectoral support, including airports, travel agents, and a scheme being developed by the Department for Infrastructure targeting the taxi and coach sectors. In addition, £600 million continues to be held centrally pending the Department of Health's assessment of costs for 2020-21. Further decisions on funding will be made following the Department of Health's assessment of need, and proposals from Departments on further sectoral support.

The Executive continue to respond to the changing environment that COVID-19 brings. The allocations that I have set out will contribute to our aims of supporting businesses, protecting the vulnerable and ensuring the continuation of key public services.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for meeting me earlier. Thank you very much indeed for keeping me informed of the information so far.

The Assembly can welcome the £2.2 billion that we have received from the rest of our nation. It underlines the benefits of being part of our precious Union.

Mr Allister: Hear, hear.

Dr Aiken: I expect a bit more than that.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr Aiken: Right, thank you very much indeed.

Mr Allister: [*Inaudible.*]

Dr Aiken: Minister, I am particularly pleased to see the allocations for resources. However, I note in the statement — this is not a criticism of the Finance Department — issues around the excluded, taxi drivers, the haulage industry and details on the Kickstart scheme. Maybe the Minister could say whether he has received bids from the Department for the Economy or the Department for Infrastructure for those things, which have been at least six months in gestation.

I note that we have £55 million in reserve. I also note, as my honourable friend from South Belfast continuously talks about, the issue of £2.2 million in air passenger duty (APD) that we keep giving back to the Treasury despite the fact that some of our airports need resource to keep going, in particular to maintain a 24-hour operation at Belfast International Airport. There is a real need for financial support to do that, especially with the importance of freight.

The Ulster Unionist Party, and me as Chair of the Finance Committee and leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, welcome the additional money for the A6 and Northern Ireland Water. Bearing in mind that that money needs to be spent —

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

Dr Aiken: — by the end of the financial year, can the Finance Minister explain how that money will be spent by the end of the financial year, bearing in mind the difficulties of writing contracts and getting suitable business cases put forward?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Committee Chair for his questions and commentary on the statement and allocations.

It is frustrating that it has taken some time to find a solution between Departments for sectors that were left out. Responsibility for a number of those sectors falls between Departments. It has taken some time, and an intervention by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Additional support and power have been given to Departments to make sure that they could deal with that.

The work on coaches and taxis is being done, and I have not yet received a bid. As the Member identified, we have held aside £55 million to allow for that bid, and, perhaps, a number of others for different sectors. There will also be further airport costs. That money is to try to cover those.

That, as with all the COVID money, as the Member correctly identified, has to be spent within the financial year, so we need to make sure that that work is done quickly and the costings brought forward as quickly as they can be so that the Executive, if they support whatever bid is made, can bring forward further allocations.

I get the point — others have raised it — in relation to APD. The Department for the Economy still feels that it is an important tool to support air connectivity. If it changes its view on that, I will happily consider that. In relation to Northern Ireland Water, it has identified somewhere in the

region of 11 schemes that it wants to get on with, but it is obviously a matter for the Department for Infrastructure to ensure that the allocation is spent. Departments know when they bid for this money — we have had long conversations with them about it — that it is COVID money. It has to be spent in this financial year, so those who are bidding for capital know the constraints in relation to that. I assume that they have made those bids in the full expectation that they can spend the money in the time available.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): As Members will be aware, some discretion is being shown to Committee Chairs to ask a question [*Laughter*] so I ask all Members to make a brief introduction and then come to their question.

Mr Frew: I want to put on record that I welcome the funding towards the hydrogen energy economy project. I believe that that will assist not only in the recovery but in the coming years with regard to the climate emergency and the recovery of industry in my constituency and wider afield in Northern Ireland.

Is it not frustrating when we have a large pot of money — £55 million — sitting at the centre that could be used to help to alleviate the pain and suffering of some of our industries that have carried on throughout this COVID emergency, not least the haulage companies and the taxi and coach sectors, who have been penalised further by the Infrastructure Minister's slowness on MOTs, PSVs and licence requirements for drivers?

Mr Murphy: I cannot answer for the Infrastructure Minister in relation to those other matters, and I am sure that those are issues that you will raise directly with her. I know that there was an issue between the Department for the Economy and the Department for Infrastructure in relation to supporting those sectors that you have outlined, and it was quite clear that, for the Department for Infrastructure to accept that, it needed to have some additional powers conferred on it. So, it was not just a straightforward, "Who wants to take this case and who is going to run with it?". It took some time to resolve that. That is frustrating, particularly if you are a sector that is waiting on support in very challenging economic times. So, I am glad that that has been resolved, and I look forward to a submission being brought along so that the Executive can consider an allocation to a number of those sectors.

In relation to the hydrogen scheme, there is funding in there to have a test project in relation to that. I am due to have a cross-departmental discussion with a number of other Ministers in the near future to get further information about that, and I know that it is something that people have been advocating very strongly.

Mr McHugh: Minister, have you received bids from any of the groups — some are from my constituency — that have been excluded from previous schemes —?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, order. I urge Members to stand adjacent to a microphone to get appropriate distancing and so that everyone can hear for the record.

Mr McHugh: I will ask the same question again. Have you received bids from any of the groups — many are from my constituency — that have been excluded from previous schemes? What arrangements are being made to accommodate those people?

Mr Murphy: I am sure that we have all received representation from various sectors that, for one reason or another, have fallen through the gaps in relation to the supports that have been made available to date. We have talked about the coaches and taxis, and I know that travel agents, newspapers, self-employed and newly self-employed people have been making cases. There are difficulties with some of those, particularly in relation to the self-employed. It would involve the assistance, or, certainly, the oversight of HMRC, which may not be available to us.

There have been challenges, and some of those have been because they fall between Departments and getting people to accept responsibility for that. There are also challenges for some of the sectors around giving support and verifying that that support was going to the right people. There are a number of challenges around all that, and I feel very much for those who are continuing to struggle and feel that they have been left out, and I know that the Executive are keen to try and give support as quickly as they can to them. That is why I have kept a pot of money in reserve so that we can do that as quickly as possible.

Mr O'Toole: I think that it is worth saying up front that I do not think that there is any legal doubt over whether it was the Infrastructure Minister or the Economy Minister's legal vires to support certain sectors; it was the Economy Minister's. On that note, in a previous life, I used to do improvisational comedy when I was much, much younger, and, unfortunately, there seems to be a high degree of improvisation around business support.

We have £40 million allocated to business support, including £8.5 million that is just called "assistance to business". That seems to be very whack-a-mole and improvised. Why has the Economy Minister not worked with the Finance Minister to produce a joined-up economic recovery plan that explains exactly where the money is going and why it is going to particular places? Further to that, just at the bottom of the table —

1.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mr O'Toole: — there is —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I have been flexible with the individual. I allowed him a long introduction. This is an opportunity to ask a question of the Minister.

Mr Murphy: Everybody will have their version of where the issues lay between Economy and Infrastructure in assisting some sectors. I am just pleased that the matter has been resolved and that Infrastructure has undertaken to do it. I look forward to working with the Infrastructure Minister to identify how we get support to those sectors.

A statement such as this has to be condensed. I could speak for two or three hours, but the Speaker might take issue with that. The £8.5 million is for:

"assistance to business, to encourage new businesses, help retain employees, attract FDI and boost the screen industry and games sector".

I am sure that the Member can get more detail on that from the Department for the Economy, should he choose to engage with it.

The Department for the Economy produced its own economic recovery document. The Executive produced a framework for economic recovery, against which the allocations were set. It took a little time over the summer to get that together, which is why we waited until it was available to us. It was not a question of the Economy Minister and I working together; the Executive made the allocations against their own framework.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am disappointed that those who have been excluded from support and hauliers are not included in the funds. For hauliers, I note that powers have been passed or were meant to be passed to the Infrastructure Minister, but that has not yet occurred. It is concerning that a significant number of Barnett consequentials are coming to Northern Ireland, yet there has not been, for example, a bid for funding and a scheme rolled out for the Kickstart scheme, even though that was announced in Great Britain —

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

Mr Muir: — back in July. What measures is the Minister taking to ensure that the moneys are spent in this financial year and that we will not surrender any moneys at the end of it?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that something coming across as a Barnett consequential does not automatically go to the same issue; it is up to the Executive to decide how to use that money. Clearly, the Executive, having ensured that the health system has enough money to cope with the pandemic, wanted to turn their mind to economic recovery. The economy has suffered greatly because of the pandemic and the associated lockdowns and restrictions. We wanted to ensure that we targeted the limited resource — it is a limited resource — to the best effect for economic recovery.

A significant amount of work has been done among officials in all Departments. They are clear that the COVID allocations are for this financial year. Money that is bid for and schemes that are put forward have to be spent in this financial year. We will continue to monitor that. As I said at the start of my statement, a number of surrenders have been added to the pot, where people identified early on that they did not need money that had been previously allocated and it has been returned. We will keep a close eye on Departments to make sure that that happens over the coming weeks and months.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his statement. Given the need to change the way in which we operate during a pandemic, particularly in the health service, will any money being held centrally be ring-fenced for the much-needed health service transformation?

Mr Murphy: As I said, £600 million is being held centrally. The Minister of Health will bring forward an assessment. COVID money has to be spent this year. It is a substantial amount of money, but the health service can make use of a substantial amount of money. He will bring forward details on that, because we want to be clear that there is enough money to cope with what is coming at us. It is clear that there will be another COVID surge, which will coincide with the winter flu to create significant difficulties for the health service, so we need to make sure that it is properly resourced. In those costs, he is also looking at recovery in the health system. He will bring forward

to us an assessment of what he needs and what he can spend in this financial year. As I say, £600 million is a lot of money to cover that. If he does not require it all, that will be put back into the pot and reallocated to other areas, but I know that recovery and assistance for the health service generally is part of his thinking for spending that money.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, will you join me in encouraging Minister Mallon to use some of the £15 million allocated to NI Water for the residents of Galliagh Shore in Enniskillen?

Mr Murphy: I am sure that Members have received correspondence from people involved. It seems to be an appalling situation, and I have strong sympathy for residents there who have found themselves, through no fault of their own, in a situation where the services, in terms of sewage and waste water to their houses, have not been finished and there does not seem to be any route to get that finished. We have, as I said in the statement, allocated £15 million capital to Northern Ireland Water specifically for schemes. We recently provided additional funding to Northern Ireland Water of £27 million of resource as well, so I hope that the Infrastructure Department can, now that it has sufficient resource, engage with the residents in that Galliagh Shore scheme and see if they can find a resolution to those unacceptable problems.

Mr Givan: Minister, how much has been allocated to Translink to date? I note in the statement that the most recent allocation is £20 million, and it has appeared in every statement so far. What is the total that Translink has been in receipt of? Was there a missed opportunity for Translink to avail itself of additional support through the furlough scheme, which would have allowed Executive funding to have gone into other schemes?

Mr Murphy: I do not have the figures, but, as I have dealt with this a number of times over the last number of months, I think — if I need to correct this, I will come back and correct it — that we gave an additional £20 million to Translink in the Budget in March above and beyond what the Department for Infrastructure received, and I think that a further £70 million has been allocated from the COVID allocations to Translink. My guess is that about £90 million has been given to Translink since March.

The Member asked a question about furlough. I know that the Infrastructure Minister looked at that. I gave advice because, initially, people considered that furlough was only for the private sector and we then became aware that the public sector could avail itself of it in certain circumstances. Translink was, I think, eligible for that — some of the workers there were — and the Department for Infrastructure and Translink looked at that and decided not to take the route. I do not know why; that is a matter for the Minister for Infrastructure and the CEO of Translink to answer. I think that it has received in the region of £90 million in additional funding since the start of the financial year.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, £55.2 million has been held centrally and you have outlined that it is for sectoral support, including airports, travel agents, taxis and coaches. Can you give us an update on the planned financial support for airports, please?

Mr Murphy: Yes. We provided some COVID support to airports that made a case and needed that money. Business has begun to pick up again, which is good news for our three airports. There is consideration of security and safety costs to the airports, and we will attempt to provide further support in relation to that. Obviously, that discussion will have to be had with each of the three airports, and we will see what assistance might be required. We also have to match that against the resource that we have to give them. The Executive have held back a pot of £55 million and agreed that some of that will be allocated to airports. We need to have that discussion with them fairly soon to see what is required.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the further allocated support, particularly for our arts sector. Will the Minister agree with me that all signs seem to be pointing towards a further lockdown? That being the case, what planning has his Department done to put support in place for when that inevitably happens?

Mr Murphy: I am not sure that it is inevitable. I suppose that we can all look at how things are developing and make our own guess. We have not received any advice at the Executive that a further lockdown is required. Obviously, there are restrictions in place in the home setting, but a further lockdown would directly impact on businesses. We have not received that advice. As I said, there is a pot set aside for a number of interventions. Should there be money left when those interventions are made, I will go back to the Executive to ask whether they want to reallocate what is left or to keep, in case we get to the type of lockdown scenario that the Member talks about, some money set aside into the new year, bearing in mind that it has to be spent by the end of the financial year, to see what the pandemic might throw at us in the time ahead. It would be prudent to keep some money in the pot for emergency assistance should that be required.

Mr Nesbitt: I acknowledge that the Minister faces two massive challenges: protecting public services and trying to preserve the fabric of society. On the latter, I very much welcome the money for the arts that is now being released.

My question is about sport. The chief executive of the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) has spoken about an existential threat to the future of professional rugby on the island, including Ulster. The all-party group on sport last week heard a common theme from governing bodies. Gate receipts are drying up, sponsors are either withdrawing or seeking to renegotiate and money is very tight. Can the Minister give clarity to the sports on where they stand in the Executive's priorities, please?

Mr Murphy: I can speak personally as somebody who continues to be involved in sport. The benefit to society generally is immeasurable. I was fortunate enough to attend a hurling final yesterday in Armagh, and I know about the organisation that goes into that to ensure that people are safe and socially distanced and that the crowds are controlled by people who are volunteers and who put their own health at risk by undertaking to do that to allow people to get the enjoyment and value of attending a live sports event. For me, that is a huge benefit, and it makes a huge contribution to society in engaging with young people and giving them direction, support and positivity in their lives.

By all means, we try to support sport as much as we can. I recognise clearly the limitations that there are with crowds. In this part of the island we are fortunate that we can have some attendance at games, whereas, in the Southern part, you cannot. There is a huge challenge for rugby, Gaelic, soccer and all sports, and we have to keep engaging with them to see how best we can help. I noticed that the Government in Dublin made some intervention with the GAA in carrying out the all-Ireland county championships. I am sure that that is welcome. That will apply in the Six Counties as well. We have to continue that engagement with the sports and see what we can do to support them. As I said, the work that sportspeople do — the vast bulk of it voluntary — for us is immeasurable in its benefit.

Ms Mullan: Minister, I also welcome the statement, in particular the extra funding for the A6 development and your ongoing commitment to addressing regional inequalities. The allocations were made alongside the announcement of a job support scheme, which is also critical to economic recovery. What is your initial assessment of the new scheme?

Mr Murphy: There was a clear demand from the employers that we spoke to, and we have been articulating to the Treasury for some months the idea that a cliff edge in October for the furlough scheme, as it is more popularly known, would be disastrous for businesses, employers and employees here and would see large-scale redundancies. I am pleased that some form of scheme has continued, but it is nowhere near as generous and will present significant challenges, particularly to low-paid and part-time employees. The support is much reduced from that of the previous job retention scheme and there is a vast difference between the two, but I have to say that it is better than having no scheme. It will present some significant challenges, and I do no doubt that we will see an increase in redundancies as a consequence.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much to the Minister. I am delighted to see that the statement includes a kick-start to the hydrogen economy. We now have the opportunity to resolve Northern Ireland Water's problems if only we were to make it produce hydrogen. Do not get my geek up on that one.

When you get to this stage in questions — the Deputy Speaker has been very kind — it can be that all the questions have been asked. Mine is about joined-up working between the Minister's Department and the Treasury. Is this it? Is this the last of the money that we will see this year? We know, as you mentioned, that councils are vital to delivering on the ground. The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) told us that local government needed £40 million just to break even. Will there be any more money coming from Treasury, or do we need to send a clear message that that is it from big government and the rest has to be brought in with income?

1.45 pm

Mr Murphy: I have to say that there has been no indication that anything more is coming. As a matter of fact, when we received the significant allocation, particularly for the Department of Health, which we set aside, we were told very clearly that that was the last COVID money from Treasury. Whether that changes will very much be determined not by what goes on here but, more than likely, what goes on in southern England and whether there

is a change to that. For instance, when we raised the furlough scheme, which was mentioned in the previous question, we received clear advice that that was it, but they have now come forward with some form of job retention scheme, albeit much reduced.

We do not know whether we will get further allocations. Other pressures might come to bear on the Government in London and force them to change their mind, but we have to operate on the basis of what we know we have. That is why we are saying to people that, apart from the money set aside for Health, which may well all be used by Health, and the £55 million set aside for other sectors, as far as the Executive are concerned, we have no further COVID allocations to make.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Minister, for your statement to the House this afternoon. Will you give me a bit more detail about the £80 million in financial transactions capital (FTC) for Ulster University? This comes on top of a switch earlier this year from FTC to cash allowance. Why is this coming from the Executive Office?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for her question. She is right: FTC of £80 million has been agreed for the Ulster University's Belfast campus project. It is not an allocation specific to COVID recovery but a planned allocation as part of this project, and it needs to be agreed now to allow the project to access the required funding. Conditional approval has already been given by the Department for the Economy and the Department of Finance for the loan to Ulster University in respect of its Belfast project, and due diligence has been undertaken by Economy on the stability of the project and the capability of the university.

The Executive Office had opted in to playing a role in what is a hugely critical project, not just for Belfast but, by implication, through its knock-on effect, for Magee. It is critical that Ulster University is able to complete these very significant projects. The Executive Office has become involved to ensure that the project, the significance of which goes beyond Belfast or, indeed, the Economy Department, is delivered properly.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. These allocations will, for some, plug a gap, but not for all. So many are still excluded. What is missing — Mr O'Toole touched on it — is funding for a long-term, coherent green plan for economic recovery. What discussions have there been across the Executive, and your Department, on funding this? When will we see such a plan come forward?

Mr Murphy: The process that we are dealing with is COVID allocations: money that we received from Treasury this year that was not in the plans last February/March when we were setting the Budget or even when we were discussing the idea of a revamped Programme for Government. This money has come to us and has to be allocated within this year. So, we are not talking about long-term plans being attached to this; we are talking about economic recovery in the here and now, meeting the challenges of the pandemic and trying to assist businesses to get through this crisis. That does not set aside the fact that the Executive will set a Budget coming into the autumn. We will consult on that and agree it in early spring. I hope that it will be a multi-annual Budget, if we can get clarity from Treasury. That Budget, and the Programme for Government that accompanies it, will be where the

discussion on long-term, green recovery planning should be had.

Mr Allister: I assume that all the money announced today is not COVID money. The capital money, for example, seems to be a reallocation of money that was surrendered. Can the Minister give us any indication of how far there has been departure under Barnett from the pigeonholes in respect of which the COVID money was allocated to how it is being spent? I would like some picture of the disaggregation.

Mr Murphy: I can get you that detail. I do not have it to hand. Over the last six months, we have made a number of COVID allocations. Generally, they have come in a fairly broad category. We got a significant amount for Health, which we are sitting on until Health decides what it needs. A significant amount came across for PPE, and we have used some of that to purchase PPE for Health and other Departments. I do not see a huge amount of departure. Broadly speaking, there was the economic recovery money and the resilience money for the Health Department. However, I can certainly get those figures. We will supply those to you.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement. Most of this money will obviously be welcome, but it will not address some of the longer-term issues re the lack of funding for our services. The Minister will be aware that Rishi Sunak has indicated his preference for corporation tax to increase by 5%. Does the Minister have any views on that? Would you like it to increase by 5% or more? If so, how much extra money would that bring in for public services here?

Mr Murphy: There has been no discussion on a corporation tax increase or decrease. As a matter of fact, both myself and the Minister for the Economy said that it is not something that we are considering at this time.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister. Minister, forgive me but it does not really feel like this statement, aside from its title, is on COVID-related allocations. Indeed, it could be argued that a lot of the allocations that you have made were gaps that existed before the pandemic. Will the Minister's Department audit how it is spent — for example, within councils and universities — so that it goes directly to difficulties related to COVID-19?

Mr Murphy: Yes. Of course we will continue to engage. Departments put forward bids in detail which is not available in the statement, but you are more than free to put questions to Departments to get information on any of the money that they received. Councils have been at the forefront of assisting and fighting this pandemic, in terms of not just the services that they provide but how they harness the public and voluntary spirit that is out there in the country. They assisted with services like food parcels that I do not think that the Executive would have been able to deliver themselves. Councils also suffered a significant loss of income, as many businesses did. They are a critical part of joined-up government.

The bid for councils was more than we were able to give, but it was important to give support to councils. I have had engagements with NILGA and other council representatives to hear at first hand the problems that they continue to have. It is important to give councils support. As we head towards what looks like another increase and

possibly another surge in the virus, the role of councils will be critical.

We do engage. Departments put in detailed bids. Those are interrogated. We asked them to rank the bids in order of importance. They were also set against the framework recovery document to make sure that they will make a contribution to economic recovery.

Mr Stewart: Minister, a great deal of responsibility tennis has been played by various Ministers about who is responsible for providing additional support for businesses that, to date, have not been able to avail themselves of support or intervention from the Executive. A motion to that effect was passed unanimously in here two weeks ago. Have you had a bid from the Minister for the Economy yet? In the absence of one, are you, with your Executive colleagues, in a position to create a package of support for those SMEs that have, to date, missed out?

Mr Murphy: No, not as yet. We can debate all day whose responsibility these things are, and it has gone back and forward. To be quite honest, I can only make a recommendation for allocations; that is what I do. I bring that to the Executive on the basis of a bid made by a Department; I have been very clear about that. I do not have the authority or responsibility to put together packages of support from the Finance Department. We assess what is brought to us and then make a recommendation to the Executive with the funding that is available to us.

To be quite honest, I am more interested in people getting on together, working on these things and starting to get support out to where it is needed. We have done that very well. I am sure that, like many other Members, you engage with people in business and other areas. They have greatly appreciated the rates reliefs and all the support that has been given to the public to assist in fighting the pandemic. However, there are sectors that are still understandably annoyed at being left out. The sooner that we can put that together and get support to them, the better.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I thank Members for asking questions. All Members' questions have been taken.

Members, the next item of business on the Order Paper is Question Time at 2.00 pm. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, that we suspend the sitting briefly until then. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.54 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Speaker: As I informed Members at the start of the sitting, the First Minister will be responding today.

Clerical Child Abuse

1. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the inter-departmental working group on mother and baby Homes, Magdalene laundries and historical clerical child abuse, particularly the issue of clerical child abuse. (AQO 739/17-22)

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): The Department of Health leads the work on the mother and baby Homes and Magdalene laundries, while the Executive Office leads the work on historical clerical child abuse. Ministers are aware of the impact that clerical abuse has had on many individuals' lives and the importance of progressing the work. The working group intends to commission a research project on clerical child abuse later this year. The terms of reference will be formally agreed later, but it is intended that it will cover opportunities to improve existing safeguarding practice as well as how best to engage with victims and survivors.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the First Minister. I met Executive Office officials probably three years ago, and they were talking about the terms of reference for this research. Is there any way that you could push that forward? Obviously, a lot of the victims are very distressed at the delay.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. Indeed, I know that many of the victims have been lobbying hard on that. I very much would like to see the work being taken forward in a more timely fashion. As the Member will know, the Department of Health appointed Judith Gillespie to take forward some of the work in relation to the mother and baby Homes. As part of that, she has been engaging widely. She succeeded Peter McBride, as the Member probably knows as well. All of that was happening during suspension, and then Ms Gillespie was appointed by the Department of Health recently.

It is important that we take the issues forward. There is a lot to be done on the matter. In some ways, it also goes alongside the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse (COSICA) appointment, which I will address later. It is important that we move all these issues forward so that people can get closure and the restitution and justice that they so rightly deserve.

Mr McGrath: Do our joint First Ministers think that the compensation levels that were offered for the data breach by the interim advocate's office were suitable for the level of trauma that some of those people experienced?

Mrs Foster: The Chair, better than most, will realise that this is a legal process, and, therefore, we are dealing with our lawyers. They are dealing with all these matters.

It would be wrong of me to intervene on those matters because some of them will end up in court. It is important that we reference and respect that.

Ms Dillon: Is it intended to have a redress scheme for clerical abuse that is similar in type to that in place for historical institutional abuse (HIA)?

Mrs Foster: People who were in institutions such as the mother and baby Homes up to the age of 18 can apply for redress through the scheme that exists. We will have to see, after the piece of work by Judith Gillespie is done and, indeed, given the wider terms of reference for clerical abuse, whether any gaps remain. I should say, very clearly, that those who were in mother and baby Homes up to the age of 18 can seek redress through the historical institutional abuse inquiry.

Mr Carroll: How will the Minister's office ensure that the voices of victims, who feel let down and excluded so far, will be heard throughout and at the end of the process?

Mrs Foster: We have made good strides in listening to victims' voices. I will answer a question later about the commissioner appointment. It is important that we also reference the fact that Judith Gillespie is proceeding with her piece of work and is working with victims and survivors as well. That is important. The piece of work that she is taking forward is very difficult but important. We wish her well and look forward to what she has to say when she has finished it.

COVID-19: Update

2. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 740/17-22)

9. **Dr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their approach to reinforcing COVID-19 protection messages. (AQO 747/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 2 and 9 together. Whilst COVID-19 is primarily a health pandemic, it is also causing significant societal and economic impacts. The Executive's response, therefore, aims to deliver a balanced package of measures that will target support where it is needed most across all the areas. The Executive's approach continues to be flexible in responding to the emerging situation. Most recently, it included the introduction of restrictions in domestic settings, initially on a postcode basis and then extended to all households given the concerning levels of transmission across the community. The focus of those restrictions on household settings is informed by the evidence that we have from the test, trace, protect programme, which tells us that household transmission and informal interactions in the community are playing a role in increased positive case numbers. We continue to keep the situation under very close review, and we are prepared to respond as necessary in order to flatten the rate of infection and, ultimately, save lives.

These have been the most challenging of times for people, and we understand that they are weary of COVID-19. However, it is crucial that everyone continues to follow the consistent public health messaging. The Executive's high-impact, cross-platform public information campaign continually reinforces the message on social distancing, maintaining good hand and respiratory hygiene, wearing

face coverings and downloading the StopCOVID NI app. We want to ensure that that information is communicated to as wide an audience as possible, and last week the deputy First Minister and I made a public address to update everyone in the community on the current situation and to reinforce those crucial messages. That was broadcast live on a number of platforms, and the viewing figures for the BBC alone were over 230,000.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the First Minister for her answers so far. Can I take the opportunity on this, 28 September, to wish the First Minister a very happy Ulster Day?

Many Members will have been contacted by constituents who are concerned about cancer care for their loved ones or, indeed, for themselves. Is the First Minister satisfied that progress is being made on access to non-COVID treatments in our health service?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member and wish him a happy Ulster Day as well.

Non-COVID healthcare concerns the Executive greatly. I was pleased that the Health Minister brought forward his new cancer strategy paper to the Executive last week and informed the House in a written statement about all that. It is very important that we look at the short and medium-term plan to rebuild and, indeed, to stabilise our cancer, oncology and haematology services, because that rebuilding plan is critical in trying to deal with all those very difficult diagnoses. We very much want to focus on that as well, of course, as dealing with COVID. We want to make sure that the trusts have their plans in place in order to deal with all the non-COVID healthcare as well.

Mr Speaker: I call Steve Aiken, whose question 9 was grouped with question 2.

Dr Aiken: I am sorry. My apologies. I withdraw the question.

Mr Catney: Joint First Minister, has the Department reviewed the communications strategy on the COVID response?

Mrs Foster: As I indicated in my substantive answer, we made a communication directly to the people of Northern Ireland last Tuesday. One of the issues that we have been concerned about over these past number of days and weeks is the messaging for our young people and the ability to get the message to them. It is important that everyone hears, understands and acts upon key messages. We have now put in place a digital campaign that is targeted specifically at our young people, and we are working in partnership with organisations like Cool FM and are using social media and something called Mobsta. The Member might be able to tell me what that is, because I am not quite sure. I am sure that many of our young people would be able to tell me. Apparently, we are going to use Mobsta to do some digital advertising that will target 16 to 25-year-olds, including students, based on their location data. Obviously, if they are in Queens or in Ulster University or wherever we will be able to get some messages to them.

We are very much proactively looking at our messaging and at making sure that we get messages out as wide as we possibly can.

Mr Beattie: Minister, I often travel under those electronic road signs on the motorway that say:

"The speed limit is not a target".

In other words, just because you can, does not mean you should. Therefore, does the First Minister believe that the other Executive party leaders undermined the Executive's healthcare message by travelling to Dublin to do a meeting that could have been done on Zoom?

Mrs Foster: That is a matter that I am sure my colleagues will be able to answer for themselves. It is important that we do give leadership in these issues, and that we set forth what we would expect other people to do as well. I happen to think that the advertisement of the speed limit not being a target is very effective, and I hope that we can use more of those sorts of quirky advertisements to get out our COVID message as well. As I said, it is important that we reach as many people as possible.

Sectarianism

3. **Mr G Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they intend to bring forward legislation that recognises sectarianism as a hate crime. (AQO 741/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Kearney to answer this question.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Ministers in the Executive have a shared commitment to ending sectarianism. Positive work is ongoing across the Together: Building a United Community Strategy to tackle sectarianism and other forms of intolerance in our society.

In May, the Department of Justice appointed Judge Desmond Marrinan to carry out an independent review of hate crime legislation here. Judge Marrinan is due to provide his final report to the Minister of Justice for consideration by the end of November. It is necessary to await the outcome of that review before further decisions can be taken on a way forward.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer up to now. In terms of the New Deal, New Approach (NDNA) commitment, will the Minister confirm his commitment that the Executive will bring forward concrete proposals to:

"formulate and require all public representatives to commit to an anti-sectarian pledge."?

Mr Kearney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an chomhalta as ucht an cheist sin a chur. A whole-society approach is required to tackle the scourge of sectarianism in all its manifestations in our society. I am very mindful of and fully supportive of the commitments in New Decade, New Approach to ending sectarianism, which include an enhanced strategic focus in the Programme for Government on ending sectarianism; a re-affirmation of support for the right to freedom from sectarianism, sectarian harassment and intimidation; a wish to see sectarianism given legal expression as hate crime; and a commitment that the Executive should formulate and require all public representatives to commit to anti-sectarian pledge.

There is a particular responsibility on all public representatives to lead by example. I am committed to working with Executive colleagues to bring forward practical proposals on an anti-sectarian pledge for all

public representatives, in a matter that delivers and is consistent with our NDNA commitments. I am committed to engaging and working with all Assembly colleagues, who are committed to exploring how we may collectively make a stand against sectarianism as the basis for building an inclusive, shared and better united future for all of us.

Mr Buckley: Thank you Mr Speaker. You will forgive me for nearly choking on the words “anti-sectarian pledge” from the Member. Does the junior Minister recognise the crass hypocrisy involved in Mr Kelly’s question and indeed his response, given that over the course of the weekend Mr Kelly not only glorified in, but gloated at, a terrorist escape at the Maze that resulted in the murder of a prison officer and the injury of another? Does he accept that that stands in stark contrast to building a united community? Those are shameful actions from a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

Mr Speaker: As you did not put a question to the junior Minister, we will move on to Justin McNulty.

Mr McNulty: Sectarianism is accepted as a form of racial abuse. After over 10 years of a DUP-Sinn Féin duopoly here, will the office of the joint First Ministers tell me at what stage their Department is at with the long-overdue implementation of a racial equality strategy?

2.15 pm

Mr Kearney: The Member, of course, will be aware that we have a five-party power-sharing coalition and that his party is an integral part of that coalition. We have commitments in relation to taking NDNA forward that rest at the very heart of the restoration of power sharing. We have the racial equality strategy 2015-2025, and the work that is involved in addressing racism in our society must be seen as part of the overall package for eradicating intolerance and all forms of bigotry in our society, regardless of the source or against which section of society that is targeted.

The work that we have in hand in the context of that strategy continues apace. It is my firm view that all Ministers and, I hope, all parties that are members of our power-sharing Executive will share the common ambition of taking forward and implementing that strategy successfully, so that we can build a genuine, shared, inclusive and united society.

Mr Allister: Does the junior Minister think that it would help towards a shared and inclusive society if his party — not least the questioner, in this case — put an end to tweeting the glorification of terrorism, which, in many cases, was crassly sectarian in itself in the choice of victims by the IRA? Would he like to give a lead by indicating that his party will now eschew such glorification of terrorism, or will we be subject to more of the same?

Mr Kearney: I thank the Member for that question. The reality, as the Member well knows, is that we all have narratives around our past and the conflict that we have lived through. For the past 100 years, those narratives have been in conflict with each other. What we need to do, particularly in the context of this mandate of renewed power-sharing, is to come together on the basis of respecting different narratives and to agree to disagree. We will not agree on the past, but we can do our level best, collectively and inclusively, to try to build a united future for everyone in society.

Next year marks the centenary of partition in our island and it can throw up the prospect of a very contested year where we disagree vehemently about what happened in the past. Perhaps, however, one of the things that we should try to do next year — I invite the Member to take this point on board for some further reflection — is rather than descend into the vortex of continually and relentlessly fighting over issues of the past, we should look towards the centenary of partition as an opportunity to develop a new dialogue and discourse in society about how we can build for the future.

North-west Development Fund

4. **Mr McHugh** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the north-west development fund. (AQO 742/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The north-west development fund has approved funding in place until December 2021, which includes an extension of the funding period to take account of COVID pressures on projects. The total committed investment by the Executive is approximately £2.15 million. That commitment is match-funded by the Republic of Ireland’s Government as agreed in the Fresh Start Agreement of 2015. The north-west development fund has delivered a number of successful projects across three regional development pillars. Some examples are developing economic growth through trade and investment missions, developing the physical environment by contributing to the INTERREG greenways project and, through north-west sports development, strengthening community cohesion and well-being.

Mr McHugh: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Will she give an assurance that she will work with the Dublin Government to deliver the NDNA commitments to provide further financial support to the fund?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary. The reference in ‘New Decade, New Approach’, at page 60, states:

“The Irish Government is committed to exploring opportunities for investment that will further support opportunities to bring greater economic prosperity and social benefits to the wider region ... and is committed in principle to providing further funding to the North West Development Fund in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Executive.”

I understand that the north-west regional development group wrote to us recently seeking a continuation of the fund beyond the current arrangements that are in place, as I say, until the end of 2021. We will look at that in the future to see what is possible. We will also look at how broad the fund can be right across the north-west, because it is important that there be equity in how the fund is distributed.

Mr T Buchanan: Does the First Minister accept that there is much more to the north-west than the maiden city? Are Ministers open to the wider hinterland and areas that extend out further than the maiden city also benefiting from the funding?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I accept that the north-west is greater than the maiden city. It is important that that be recognised and taken into account by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council.

The north-west goes across a number of regions, and it is important, going forward, that that be reflected in the work.

Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

5. **Ms Dolan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work undertaken to amend the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. (AQO 743/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, with your permission, junior Minister Kearney will answer this question.

Mr Kearney: There are several potential amendments to the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 being considered by various business areas in the Executive Office. Those extend to the inclusion of monitoring information as regards nationality and ethnic origin; the repeal or amendment of the teachers' exception in article 71, which was created in 1976 to address the imbalance in employment opportunities for teachers; and an amendment to article 2(4) to reflect the changed circumstances of a post-conflict society, enabling ex-prisoners and their families to transition into making a positive contribution to society.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he outline the progress made in implementing the employers' guidance in respect of public-sector recruitment and vetting?

Mr Kearney: Yes, I can. The employers' guidance was designed to assist employers to follow best practice and is aimed at reducing barriers to employment and enhancing the reintegration of those with conflict-related convictions. This week, junior Minister Lyons and I met members of the review panel for an update on their work. We had a very positive and informative discussion with panel members. We recognise that a lot of good work has been and continues to be taken forward. However, whilst there have been key successes and progress in a number of areas to date, including intervention on individual cases, several issues remain to be addressed. Progressing that work and continuing to engage with the review panel will be a priority in the period ahead.

Mr Lyttle: Does the Minister agree that the exemption of teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order is archaic? Will the Executive Office bring forward legislation to repeal the exemption of teachers from legal protection in cases of employment discrimination on the grounds of religious belief and political opinion?

Mr Kearney: The Member will be aware that article 71 has been enshrined in legislation with a view to effectively providing for lawful discrimination in the employment of teachers in both the controlled and maintained sectors. TEO has responsibility for bringing forward the relevant legislation for amendment, but, clearly, the Department of Education would have significant input and opinion on what those kinds of amendments could or should look like in the future. I can advise the Member that a meeting is scheduled for next week, where officials from TEO will engage with officials from the Department of Education to take forward that discussion.

Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse

6. **Mr Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the appointment of a Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse. (AQO 744/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The selection process for the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse was launched in June, with interviews taking place in mid-August. Those candidates assessed as appointable by the selection panel gave a presentation to the deputy First Minister and me on 9 September. We are in the final stages of the appointment process and, once the requisite pre-appointment checks are completed, the deputy First Minister and I will make a formal announcement regarding the commissioner's appointment.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister agree that the appointment of the new commissioner presents a renewed opportunity to progress all the Hart recommendations, particularly with a focus on the apology?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I remind Members that the Hart report recommended that those who were responsible for each of the institutions investigated by the inquiry, where it found systematic failings, should make a public apology as a wholehearted and unconditional recognition of the failures of the past. That is very much something that the new commissioner will take forward, as well as the memorial that we want to see progressed. Obviously, the commissioner will need to do that in conjunction with the victims and survivors to make sure that it is an appropriate apology and memorial. That is something that the new commissioner should take on very quickly.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, I have heard you mention several times in the Chamber how you will work once the new commissioner is in place. It is 45 months since the Hart recommendations were made. What is preventing you and the deputy First Minister from making a joint apology in the Chamber?

Mrs Foster: I think that it is important that all the institutions that have been named in that report should make the appropriate apology. It is one thing for me to stand and make the apology, but the victims and survivors will want to hear it directly from the institutions involved, and that is why we have someone to work with the victims and survivors. I accept that, whilst the interim advocate has been employed in some of that business, there have been some difficulties around that. We wish that it were otherwise but that is where we are at present. However, I am hopeful that we will have the new commissioner in place very shortly. We are in the midst now of pre-security checks and all those sorts of things so that we can take the matter forward, and that they can deal with it very quickly.

Mr McGrath: I congratulate the Department on coming to the end of the process of appointing somebody. Does the First Minister not think that the House deserved a verbal update today about the appointment of the head of the Civil Service, rather than us having to find out most of the information from the press?

Mrs Foster: As the Member is aware — at least, I hope that he is aware — a written statement was placed with the

Office of the Speaker over the weekend because we knew that this was a matter of some note. Therefore, that written statement is available to all.

Mr Dunne: On the payment of compensation to the innocent victims and their families, what progress has been made in recovering some funding from the clerical orders and other institutions that ran these deplorable homes?

Mrs Foster: The cost estimates for financial redress range from £149 million, at the lower end, to £402 million, as a central estimate, up to £668 million, at the upper end. Contributions from the institutions, which I have already referenced, would help to defray some of those costs. A potential meeting was discussed with the two archbishops — the archbishop from the Church of Ireland and the archbishop from the Roman Catholic Church. We will shortly write to both archbishops and to the institutions about holding a round-table meeting to emphasise the seriousness of these negotiations, the urgency of making progress and to agree on principles that would govern those negotiations.

It is a moral imperative, and it would be warmly welcomed by the victims and survivors if the institutions stepped up in that way.

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

2.30 pm

Maze Prison Protest

T1. **Mr Dunne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister can give an assurance that she will follow up with the responsible authorities, including the Justice Minister, the background to the protest that was held at the Maze prison at the weekend, which was, as he understands, facilitated within the grounds of the prison, which is deplorable and unacceptable. (AQT 421/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The Justice Minister alerted her Executive colleagues to the fact that the protest was taking place at the weekend. However, I note what the Member has said in relation to where the protest took place, and we will certainly look for an update from the Minister on that.

Mr Dunne: Will the First Minister give us an assurance that this will not recur? I was in the Justice Committee when the matter was raised by the Chairman with the Chief Constable. He made it clear that such a protest was not welcome in the area and that the Chief Constable should take some action relating to it. We are extremely disappointed at the outcome.

Mrs Foster: I am sure that the Policing Board will address the matter in due course. Operational decisions by the Chief Constable should be reported there, as he is accountable to the Policing Board. However, I will take up the matter of where the protest took place with the Justice Minister.

US Envoy Talks

T2. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have any plans for discussions with the US envoy, Mick Mulvaney, during his visit to Northern Ireland. (AQT 422/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Mr Mulvaney has been appointed by the Trump Administration as an envoy to Northern Ireland, principally around economic development. We very much look forward to speaking to him about his ideas on economic development. The deputy First Minister and I were due to meet Mr Mulvaney early tomorrow morning, and I think that he is due to speak to the other Ministers at that stage.

Mr T Buchanan: What role does she believe the US can usefully play in helping to build sustainability in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: As the Member is probably aware, the US is the biggest international investor in Northern Ireland. Many firms are US-based, and they invest in Northern Ireland because of the strengths of our people and the skills that they have. We want to discuss with Mr Mulvaney where he sees the upcoming opportunities for trade and investment in particular. I understand that he has particular interests in financial technology and cybersecurity. Those are areas in which we are strong. I look forward to having that conversation with him tomorrow, and I hope we can further drive economic investment in Northern Ireland on the basis, as I say, of our people, our skills and our ability to do business.

Charlotte's Law

T3. **Ms Sugden** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the First Minister, as Chair of the Executive Committee, is influencing the introduction of Charlotte's law, given that she has publicly voiced her support for such legislation, albeit that it would fall within the remit of the Minister of Justice. (AQT 423/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I understand that the matter is to be debated in the House later. I have met both families who are campaigning for this. It is completely inhumane that persons who commit murder do not tell the family where the body is, to allow closure. That should be reflected in the justice system, and I hope that the House will have its say in that. I hope it backs the campaign of the two families, who, no doubt, will watch closely what we have to say on the matter.

Ms Sugden: I thank the First Minister for her comments and share her sentiments entirely. How does the First Minister feel that, with less than two years left of this mandate, it is unlikely that we will get this onto the statute book before the next election, in 2022? Will there be another opportunity, perhaps through a legislative consent motion (LCM) on the legislation that is currently passing through the Commons?

Mrs Foster: That is something that we should discuss. If we get the House to back the motion today, we should look at how we progress the issue, whether through this House or through an LCM for the Westminster legislation. Obviously, we would always much prefer to have our own legislation in Northern Ireland. However, if we cannot do that, an LCM for the Westminster legislation should certainly be looked at, as it is about bringing closure to a family that is grieving greatly and trying to find a way of dealing with that grief.

National Police Memorial Day

T4. **Mr Buckley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister will join with him in ensuring that the police officers who gave their all are never forgotten but always remembered for their commitment and ultimate sacrifice, especially because yesterday marked National Police Memorial Day, when we as a nation rightly paused to reflect on those gallant police officers who have lost their life while on duty throughout the United Kingdom, a day that is particularly poignant in Northern Ireland where, since 1969, over 300 officers have been killed and many thousands injured. (AQT 424/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Ordinarily, I would have attended National Police Memorial Day. It happens on a UK-wide basis, and the four nations take it in turn to host it. Of course, it was made all the more poignant yesterday by the killing on Friday of Sergeant Matt Ratana in Croydon police station. We send our sincere sympathies to his family and colleagues. Unfortunately, we in Northern Ireland know only too well what it is to have police officers murdered. Therefore, it is important that our public servants are remembered in this way. I was particularly pleased to see the family of David Johnston meet our Chief Constable. Of course, David Johnston, along with his colleague John Graham, was murdered on the streets of Lurgan in 1997, and it is important and right that we remember their sacrifice.

Mr Buckley: I know that the Minister knows full well that the threat to those who serve as police officers today is very real. It was brought into sharp focus, as she mentioned, by the tragic murder of Sergeant Matt Ratana of the Metropolitan Police. Would the First Minister agree that, as a matter of urgency, we must legislate for tougher sentencing for those who attack our emergency services and that we should support mandatory life sentences for those who callously murder them?

Mrs Foster: Sentencing is something that, I think, the House will come back to in the near future, because, as I understand it, the Justice Minister has a consultation in relation to sentencing matters. We in Northern Ireland have the lowest sentences for the murder of police officers. When I look south of the border, I see that the Republic of Ireland has a mandatory 40-year sentence for the capital murder of police officers, with no discretion for judges. In England, it is 30 years; in Scotland, 20. Therefore, there is a need for us to step up and look at sentencing as punishment, of course, but also as a deterrent for those who would seek to murder our public servants.

Ebrington Barracks: TEO Investment

T6. **Ms Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the total amount that the Executive Office has invested in the Ebrington site in Derry. (AQT 426/17-22)

Mrs Foster: To date, the Executive Office has invested £38 million in the regeneration of Ebrington, including £15 million from 2016, when we took over responsibility for the regeneration of the site. We have had significant investment in the site, as the Member will know, and it is important that we continue with that development. We have been able to attract private-sector investment as well, which we very much welcome. Twenty-three of the 24 site buildings have an expression of interest, an agreement

of lease or a lease in place. That is good progress on the Ebrington site. We will continue to work with our partners in the north-west on the development of Ebrington.

Ms Anderson: Thank you for that information; the people of Derry will appreciate hearing it. Minister, there have been lots of engagements between the Executive Office and the council about the transfer of some of the buildings to the council, maybe on a phased basis with a view, ultimately, to it all being held by the council. Can you give us an outline of the nature of the discussions that are taking place between the Executive Office and the council?

Mrs Foster: The council is a key partner with us in Ebrington. Like us, it wants to see the site developed to its full potential. The transfer of the site is being progressed using a phased approach; that is absolutely correct. The first phase of the transfer process relates to the delivery of the maritime museum at Ebrington. The council is developing a business case for the project and has identified funders. The Executive Office is committed to providing £3.3 million towards what, I think, is an £11.5 million project. The maritime museum is a significant and exciting project for the north-west, and I hope that it will realise its potential. As I say, we are working with the council and will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: Liz Kimmins is not in her seat. I will move to Paula Bradshaw.

StopCOVID NI App: Irish

T8. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether consideration has been given to the StopCOVID NI app being made available in Irish, given that, following the relaunch of the NHS app last week in GB, it includes the option for Welsh. (AQT 428/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I do not think that there has consideration of that. It would be a matter for the Department of Health on the basis of need and whether people have been asking for the app in the Irish language. I am not sure if that has been the case, and there has certainly been no discussion about it.

Ms Bradshaw: In the spirit of New Decade, New Approach and the moves to take forward legislation for the Irish and other minority languages, would it not be a good idea?

Mrs Foster: The primary purpose of the StopCOVID NI app is to protect and save lives, and that has always been the focus. The app is about saving lives and livelihoods, and that has been the collective focus of everyone in the Executive, our five-party coalition. The Executive are not a duopoly, as, I think a Member said earlier. I am always amazed at how it is a duopoly when some people do not like what we do and a five-party coalition when they want to take credit. In any event, it is a five-party coalition, and people should remember that. Therefore, we will work together to save lives and protect livelihoods.

Holylands Enforcement Group

T9. **Mrs Cameron** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the enforcement group that is being headed up the junior Ministers. (AQT 429/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The enforcement group that is being headed up by the junior Ministers has been set up. It was primarily

focused on the Holylands and the difficulties there with the restrictions. It is now much wider than that, and we continue to work with our partners — the PSNI, local government and everyone involved in enforcement — so that we make sure that, as well as having the restrictions in place, there is an effective enforcement regime.

Mrs Cameron: What reports have been received in the past week about activities in the Holylands area?

Mrs Foster: The police presence in the Holylands has helped with some of the difficulties. I regret that a number of notices were handed down to students and, indeed, that some students were suspended. However, we must continue to work with our young people to get the message across to them. I note that some students are self-isolating in the halls of residence: we send them our best wishes and hope that it does not become a wider spread. The Executive Office is meeting both universities tomorrow to discuss some of the issues. I know there have been many scare stories about our universities and our young people, but I believe in our young people. I believe that, on the whole, our young people want to do what is right. I appeal to them to abide by the public health guidance and the restrictions.

Aerospace Sector: Economic Support

T10. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what economic support the Executive have been providing, particularly to the aerospace industry here, which is so vital to the city of Belfast, his constituents, people across the city and, in wider terms, Northern Ireland plc. (AQT 430/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The Executive Office very much recognises the importance of the aerospace sector. We also recognise that it is an issue not just for us in Northern Ireland but for our colleagues in Scotland and Wales. Along with our counterparts in Scotland and Wales, we took the opportunity to write to the Prime Minister in an initiative that came from Unite the Union. We were happy to do that because we believe that there needs to be more recognition of the aerospace sector. It provides us with some very well paid, highly-skilled jobs. We are fearful for the sector, and we want Whitehall and Westminster to take the initiative because it is something that needs to happen on a pan-UK basis. The aerospace sector is a huge issue and involves huge amounts of money.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, Mr Humphrey, time is up. I ask Members to take their ease while we change the personnel at the Table.

Communities

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that question 7 has been withdrawn. I call Trevor Lunn.

Mr Lunn: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ceist uimhir a haon. Question 1, Minister.

PIP/Attendance Allowance Appeals

1. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the impact the suspension of personal independence

payments (PIP) and attendance allowance face-to-face appeals has had on waiting times for hearings. (AQO 751/17-22)

Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): Maith thú, a Threabhair. I recognise that there is an impact on waiting times for all appeal types as a result of the pandemic. My Department has worked with the President of Appeal Tribunals to offer appellants a range of hearing type options, including face-to-face oral hearings; oral hearings using teleconference; oral hearings using video-link facilities; and a paper determination based on papers before the tribunal panel. Paper-determination cases commenced only on 6 July 2020. Oral hearings using technology options will commence with effect from today, 28 September 2020. Face-to-face oral hearings are set to recommence from mid-October at the main hearing centre. I have asked that alternative accommodation options be sought to facilitate hearings in local towns and villages.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that almost 40% of PIP hearings are unsuccessful at the moment. What is being done to improve that situation in terms of support for the advice sector to build skills and expertise to help people with those hearings?

Ms Ni Chuilín: I concur with the Member; the support that the independent advice sector gives people going through that process is very much valued by me and my Department. I am looking at funding for the independent advice sector, including some of the grassroots groups and even through the Appeals Service and others. I am sure that the Member agrees that it is important that we make it as easy as possible for people. When they are applying for that benefit, it is because they really need it. We need to make the process as easy and simple as possible for them.

Mr McCann: How does the Minister intend to address the backlog in the Appeals Service?

Ms Ni Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. There is a big backlog. Appeals Service has commenced listing a number of hearings and will continue to work with the President of Appeal Tribunals and DFC to ensure that more cases are listed for hearing. Appeals Service has obtained a number of licences for technology options so that it can run a number of hearings at the same time. It is also refreshing the hearing-type options with appellants using those technology options, and that will hopefully result in earlier hearing dates.

Mr Catney: Has the Minister considered making any of the jobs and benefits office services that have been available by phone over the past months permanently accessible by phone? For example, has she considered allowing the claimant commitment to be completed over the phone rather than in person?

Ms Ni Chuilín: Pat, I am unaware of what the process is for the long-term stuff, but I am certainly happy to look at it, because, as I said in response to Trevor Lunn, we need to make the process as easy as possible for people to access.

Mr Allen: What impact will COVID have on the capacity for face-to-face assessments to be conducted? What work will the Department undertake to ensure that appellants are offered the appeal type most suitable for them?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that the issue was raised at even the most recent Question Time. It really is important that, first, the hearing take place as close to the person as is possible. As the Member knows, they are all in Belfast. Not everybody who applies for the benefit is from Belfast, so we need to do something about that.

We need to ensure that the ability for someone to accompany an applicant is still there should the hearing take place by telephone, by teleconferencing or in person. As other Members have said, the independent advice sector that supports people needs in particular to be supported properly, in order to ensure that all, should they be an applicant or an appellant, are given the support that they need. More often than not, applying for those benefits is a very stressful process for people.

HMOs: COVID-19

2. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to bring to the Executive any proposed amendments to the coronavirus health protection regulations in relation to houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). (AQO 752/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. As she knows, the responsibility for coronavirus health protection regulations lies with the Department of Health. My Department has, however, published guidance for private rented sector landlords and tenants that includes information on shared houses. The guidance makes it clear that everyone living in a HMO is a member of a single household. I have no doubt that every Member of the Assembly will join me in appealing for all people in all types of households to adhere to the regulations and guidance.

The operation of licensing for HMOs is a matter for local government and is currently led by Belfast City Council on behalf of all councils. As well as providing support and assistance to councils on the development of the HMO licensing scheme, my Department has provided detailed guidance for local government on the exercise of its HMO licensing functions and a statutory code of practice for landlords to manage their properties to the required standards.

My officials will continue to participate in various cross-departmental groups, including those convened recently by the junior Ministers, and to work with all stakeholders to address ongoing issues in the Holylands.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your response. You will be aware that before we had the house parties, we had the house clearances, where they were dumping excessively in the alleyways, attracting all sorts of vermin, and engaging in antisocial and very inconsiderate behaviour. It is clear to me that the HMO Act as it stands is not strong enough, nor are the enforcement powers given to the council. I am wondering, given the experiences of the past few months, what you are planning to do to make the situation better.

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials have been part of working groups along with Belfast City Council officials, and I am quite open in saying that, if they feel that the powers that they have are not strong enough, Belfast City Council officials need to feed that back to us.

There is a big focus on landlords here as well as on tenants, because tenants have to be responsible for their behaviour. If it does come back to us from Belfast City Council, which is operating licensing on behalf of all councils, that there is a need for additional powers and additional enforcement, I am happy to look at strengthening councils' powers.

Mr G Kelly: The Minister may have answered some of this, but what are the present licensing standards? We had some comments from a Member who spoke previously about trying to strengthen them, but surely there is an obligation on landlords and managing agents to deal with antisocial behaviour in the buildings that they own or manage.

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, I agree that there is an obligation on landlords to ensure that their tenants are behaving responsibly. There is also a focus and, certainly, a responsibility on landlords because in order for them to get their licence for HMOs, they need to have fitness testing. There is also a responsibility on us all to be good neighbours. I concur with Paula Bradshaw that even before the return to university started, there were problems with houses getting cleared out, with the debris that was left for local residents. Unfortunately, that left Belfast City Council to pick up the tab. So there is a need to ensure that landlords fully accept their responsibilities, including before tenants go into their houses, when they are in those houses and when they leave them and before new tenants come in.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her remarks so far. Minister, you talked about the joint approach that we are taking towards dealing with antisocial behaviour, particularly the COVID regulations. Will you outline the discussions that you have had with the Justice Minister, who said last week that she was willing to participate fully in, but not lead, the work of the joint task force, particularly with regard to the Holylands?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that the junior Ministers, on behalf of the Executive, are responsible for convening the group. I will not comment on what other Ministers do. If I am asked to look at additional powers, regulations or even additional support for councils, I am willing to do that. No one should be living in their homes in fear or unable to get a night's sleep: their kids are going to school absolutely exhausted and their quality of life is completely diminished, and that is unacceptable. I know that the universities have stepped up to the challenges well in trying to ensure that if reminders are needed, they have been given, and they were quite public about that last week. We seem to discuss this problem every year and we need to fix it.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, you said that if Belfast City Council come to you with a request for enhanced powers around HMOs, you will do something about it, but you have also just said that this has been a problem for years. So, will you take it from me, and from others who are representatives for South Belfast, that there is a major structural challenge around HMOs, their density and how they are managed in the Holylands? Can you please ask your officials not to wait for Belfast City Council to come to you, but to proactively reach out to find out what we can do to sort out this problem, whether it is by legislation, better enforcement or whatever else?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The answer is absolutely, yes. This has, unfortunately, been a perennial problem. Up until now there have been a lot of complaints, but there have been absolutely no requests, that I am aware of, for changes in the legislation or even additional powers. I am going to check it out to be sure, but let me be clear again: if there are requests, we will certainly look at them. Indeed, I am not going to pass the buck at all. In April last year, responsibility for HMOs was passed to Belfast City Council, on behalf of all the other councils, but if the councils feel that that arrangement need to be tweaked or to be changed, let us have a look at it before the review kicks in next year.

Housing Stress: East Londonderry

3. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the number of households in housing stress in East Londonderry. (AQO 753/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The most recent waiting list figures for East Londonderry stood at 2,167, from which 1,241 applicants were deemed to be in housing stress. I am acutely aware that the number of people who are on the waiting list, along with those deemed to be in housing stress, remains very challenging, not only for that constituency but right across the entire North. That is why I am focusing on delivering as many new social homes as possible with the available funding, and I am also keen that we consider ways that we can increase the supply of new social homes to reduce the demand.

3.00 pm

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for her answer. A number of rural communities in my constituency have said that there is not enough social housing provision. Does the Minister share my concern on that issue? What steps is her Department taking to ensure that rural communities are not decimated as a result of a lack of suitable housing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be keen to know that I have met with the rural community network on that issue. I have a responsibility to ensure that there is rural proofing, but my main focus and responsibility is to ensure that those in greatest housing need are housed. We are tackling a massive list, across the board. I know that many in rural communities have moved to or settled in the private rental sector and that there is a lack of security of tenure. That is a big issue. Transformation of housing is something that I will be taking forward within the next few weeks.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her response. I know that she will agree that the levels of housing stress are too high and that we need to tackle them. Does the Minister agree that in doing so, and in making more social housing stock available, we need to ensure accessible housing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely. The need for homes to meet the needs of an ageing population and people with disabilities, as well as accessibility to such homes in areas where people want to live, raise their family and grow, has been raised a lot in the Assembly. In the past, our housing stock was sold under the right to buy, and the stock was never replaced. That is a big issue. In many respects, that displaced a lot of communities. They went to the private rented sector, which was OK at the time, but, because of a lack of security, they have had to move elsewhere — in some instances, a substantial distance away. We have a

big challenge, but we are very aware of what we need to do, particularly in rural communities.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her answers. A few weeks back, the Minister rejected a proposal on the Floor in relation to the Living Over the Shop (LOTS) scheme. Rightly or wrongly, that happened. The Minister is right — the issue affects all constituencies across Northern Ireland — and she is aware of the situation, as she said. How will we increase housing for those in housing stress?

Ms Ní Chuilín: My main reason for rejecting the Living Over the Shop grant scheme was that I had received a lot of reports that it was not value for money. Grants for private accommodation over shops, which need disability access, proper storage and space, would mean additional public spend, so it did not work out as value for money.

Ensuring that we increase supply to reduce demand is a big challenge. In the next lot of weeks, I will bring forward proposals, looking at our NDNA commitments, revitalising the Housing Executive and examining how we can make it exempt from paying corporation tax, so that that money could go back into the system. We will also look at historical debt and how we will deal with it so that the Housing Executive will be allowed to build. I am acutely aware that we are moving into three generations of people living in housing stress. That is completely unacceptable.

Ms Bailey: I am sure that the Minister will agree with, probably, everyone in the House that housing-stress levels in Northern Ireland are unacceptable. However, given that that is the situation, and the financial hardship being levied with COVID — albeit, I am mindful of the fact that, among the measures put in place in response to COVID was a mortgage holiday for many — can the Minister assure us that no one in Northern Ireland will face eviction due to COVID financial hardship?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that Deirdre Hargey brought forward measures to prevent evictions, particularly during the pandemic. I continued those, and extended them to next March. Unfortunately, the mortgage relief scheme, which helped a lot of people, was taken away by the Tory Government, as happened many, many years ago. I have spoken to people in my constituency who are receiving mortgage holidays, but achieving that is, in itself, a very stressful process. The measures that the Department, along with the Housing Executive and housing associations, put in to ensure that people were not evicted, are still there. The Housing Rights Service is still there to ensure that anybody who finds themselves in that situation gets help as early as possible. We need to ensure that evictions under those circumstances are consigned to the past.

Arts and Culture Sector: Support

4. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to support the arts and culture sector. (AQO 754/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that the Executive announced £29 million of investment to support our culture, language, arts and heritage sectors. This is additional to the £5.5 million creative fund previously announced. These sectors make a substantial contribution to our local economy, the quality of our lives, our health and well-being, and the shaping of

our standing as a place to live, work and visit. They have a vital role in delivering social renewal for communities and, indeed, the economy. My Department is finalising proposals for a suite of funding schemes to maximise the impact of this very welcome financial support in these most challenging times.

Mr McHugh: I am sure that all Members are only too aware that it is those at the grassroots level who are really suffering throughout the whole of the COVID crisis, particularly in terms of loss of earnings and so on. How can the Minister ensure that that support to the grassroots within arts and culture is delivered?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I have literally just come out of a meeting with Minister Dodds on this very issue of people who are involved in events, music, sound and all that background stuff, as well as looking at some of the bigger establishments. What I want to say is this: arts and culture are an evolving thing. People who are recipients of Arts Council funds are still getting their funds, but there are other groups who have been doing really, really great work, particularly since March, and taking the lead who have not got one penny of public funds. We need to ensure that they are looked after as well.

Mr Nesbitt: I very much welcome the injection of funding for the sector. Minister, what scope is there for co-design to ensure that all sections of the sector have their needs addressed?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question, because it is really important, in relation not just to NDNA but to this process going forward. The weakness is that there is no arts, culture and heritage strategy — none whatsoever — and so we are all in a big queue, hoping to join that queue, put in an application and get something. That is not a good way to do business. If we accept — and we do — that culture, arts and heritage not only help people but generate the economy, then they need to be put on a proper footing. I have met a group of musicians who are looking at a music strategy. I spoke to some freelancers who need to be supported as well. They have all said that, long term, they need to see an arts and culture strategy in the same way as there is one for sports. For me, that is a big weakness.

Mr Lyttle: I ask the Minister, why is there no culture strategy and how will she ensure that the creative and cultural funding reaches artists and organisations who have lost entire income streams as a result of COVID?

Ms Ní Chuilín: An arts and culture strategy was about to be produced, but then the Assembly collapsed. So there is one sitting there that is three years old, but some of the people who contributed to it are saying that it is not reflective of what was there three years ago. I can try to help as many people as possible, but I also want to ensure that those who have never received or had any recourse to public finance or public money are serviced as well. If we just look after the big institutions, there is nothing left for anyone else. I am sure the Member would agree that that is not a satisfactory position.

Mr Durkan: Like everyone else, I was delighted to hear the Executive announcement last week that the arts were finally getting funded. Well done to you, Minister, for your role in that. Now that you have got the money in, the focus is going to be on how you get the money out. It is vital

that that is done in a fair and equitable way that gets the biggest bang for your buck — or our buck. Can or will consideration and assistance be given to those musicians and singers who have suffered throughout COVID, but who were dealt another blow last week with new rules on hospitality that have virtually prohibited them from earning money in that way?

Ms Ni Chuilín: That is exactly what I want to try to do as best I possibly can.

The health regulations and restrictions that we have had had to bring in as a result of the global pandemic have prevented theatres from opening their doors. Certainly, performers and maybe even one- or two-piece bands who make their living that way faced a double whammy last week, as the Member said. A fund is already available now if the Member knows anyone who needs it. The Arts Council is looking to help people in that situation until the end of October. We need to ensure that we help as many people as possible over, I imagine, the next few months, particularly those who have had no recourse to public funds at all.

Mr Speaker: I call Paula Bradley.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you, Mr Speaker. You noticed me bobbing up and down several times. I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Indeed, the money is very welcome. Certainly, as a Committee, we have been lobbied now for what seems like months for that money to become available. The Minister mentioned people who have never received a penny and have had nothing from any funding stream. How quickly are we likely to see that money begin to be rolled out?

Ms Ni Chuilín: I am certainly looking to finalise the potential schemes this week, talking to Executive colleagues next week with a view to it going straight out into some of the arm's-length bodies (ALBs), and then looking at ways in which we can try to open up applications to others who may never have gone to ALBs before. The Member knows this, but it is worth mentioning that we have also got museums and libraries involved in this. It is crucial that not only do we keep doors open right across the piece but that, in particular, we support the groups that have emerged that are doing brilliant work to keep people mentally well and physically fit, providing enjoyment and entertainment. A lot of those people are young people from marginalised and deprived areas. They need our support.

COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme

5. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on distribution of tranche 1 of the capital COVID-19 recovery revitalisation scheme. (AQO 755/17-22)

Ms Ni Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I launched the COVID-19 recovery revitalisation programme, along with Minister Poots, on 27 July 2020. Letters of offer for tranche 1 of the programme were issued to all councils later that day. Payments totalling almost £6 million for tranche 1 have now been made to councils to provide much-needed support to local businesses as they recover and adapt to the impact of COVID-19.

Around £5 million of that funding was provided by my Department, with £1 million from DAERA, to extend the programme into rural towns and villages. The programme was designed to provide maximum flexibility, enabling

councils to work with local stakeholders to tailor their schemes to best meet the needs of their areas.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her answer. I also want to thank her and Minister Poots for that funding because it is very much appreciated, I can assure her, by businesses and rural businesses right across Mid Ulster. Can she update the House on whether the criteria for tranche 2 will be changed or remain the same in order to get the most meaningful outcome?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I say to the Member and, indeed, the rest of the Assembly that the criteria need to be as flexible and open as possible. There should be no impediments or barriers that prevent people from getting access to much-needed support. That requires working with economic development units in each of the council areas. We are hoping to have additional money; not just from my Department and Minister Poots — even Minister Mallon has expressed an interest around green and blue environment projects and also to look at sustainable travel. My responsibility is for populations of 5,000 and over, and Minister Poots's is for populations of under 5,000. That covers an awful lot. We know that, up to now, small amounts of money have made a massive difference. Councils need to work with local businesses to ensure that that support is on the ground.

Mr Butler: Can the Minister advise the House as to whether the Department was involved in the design of the overall recovery revitalisation programme in order to achieve a consistent approach across councils? I accept that there needs to be a level of flexibility. However, consistency is also important.

Ms Ní Chuilín: "Rural revitalisation" is hard to say at times. I have struggled with it myself. Yes, the assurance is there: Minister Poots and I want the programme to be accessible to people. It needs to meet their needs. They need to go through due diligence along with local councils. Local councils have worked with those people for a number of years and consistency, in a good way, is important. If any MLA feels that there has been a negative experience in their constituency, just let me know. I cannot promise or guarantee that I can fix it, but I need to know what it is.

3.15 pm

Sports Sector: COVID-19 Financial Support

6. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister for Communities whether financial support will be made available to the sports sector, including grassroots clubs unable to complete their season as a result COVID-19 restrictions. (AQO 756/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. To date, the sports hardship fund has awarded over £1 million worth of grants to 500 grassroots sports clubs and organisations to help them cover essential costs, including maintaining their facilities during lockdown and paying critical overheads. Those clubs have not been in a position to complete their seasons. I have asked officials to explore extending the criteria for funding to include sports clubs that are now experiencing financial hardship due to increased operating costs, costs associated with facility hire and cleaning regimes. As a result of that, I am pleased to announce that the sports hardship fund will reopen on 1 October.

Ms Ennis: I apologise, Mr Speaker, for not being in my place earlier. I thank the Minister for her response. How will the Minister's Department work in collaboration with Sport NI to ensure that there is maximum support for clubs as we continue to emerge from COVID.

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department, as the Member will know, will continue to work very closely with Sport NI. If their inbox is anything like mine, particularly from groups in grassroots areas that have written to me asking for support, they will have no doubt as to where the needs are. In fairness, this is an extension of the scheme on the basis of responding to the demand that is out there.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions.

Social Housing: New Builds

T1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities what discussions her Department is having or plans to have with housing associations to try to increase the social housing build. (AQT 431/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I work with a number of housing associations and they have been encouraged to try to identify land that is available on which to build. We are also going through an exercise, on behalf of the Executive, in which we are looking at areas of surplus public land on which potential housing developments can be brought forward.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answer so far. Minister, in North Down, I have over 1,229 applicants who are under housing stress and over 1,700 on the housing list. Has the Minister's Department started to look outside of the box and for the Housing Executive to start building again because that might be a quicker process than the housing associations?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The answer is yes. Under New Decade, New Approach, there are two aspects around corporation tax and getting rid of historical debt, for want of a better term. It is not just to put the Housing Executive on a better footing to look after maintenance, but also to get them into a better position to borrow money and allow them to build.

I owe Mark Durkan the Member for Foyle an apology. At the last question time, I said that Foyle did not have the worst housing figures, but they actually do; followed by North Belfast, then West Belfast and the figures go down from there. Every constituency is dealing with unacceptable levels of housing stress.

Social Housing: Common Selection Scheme

T2. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the review of the common selection scheme for social housing. (AQT 432/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question and it is a timely one. I am currently looking at the consultation that has gone out on the allocation of social housing points. Very soon, I hope to bring proposals to my Executive colleagues, to my Committee colleagues, sorry, to the Committee — I am not on the Committee anymore; I have attachment problems — and then to the House.

Mr Speaker: I think the Minister has detachment problems.

Ms Bunting: On the back of that, I am grateful to the Minister that she is bringing forward something soon, but

she will be aware that hostels are sometimes the only option. I am keen to know what action she will take to make sure that hostels are brought up to standard to suit those with mental health issues and women and men who are having to flee a home as a result of domestic violence.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Hostels are in receipt of vast sums of public money so they need to meet the very best standards. Your last point is something that I have been committed to looking at as an MLA. It is unfair and unacceptable that people leaving their home as a result of domestic violence are not considered intimidated. It is completely unacceptable that people who are fleeing their homes are joining a very long queue, and people who are not genuinely being intimidated are, effectively, jumping that queue due to so-called threats from groups. That is a fact. We had a debate in the House, brought, I think, by Fra McCann. I think it is wrong, so I am committed — not to ending intimidation points — to looking at another way. It is a really dreadful experience. However, the verification of any claim of intimidation needs to be a lot stronger than it is.

Casement Park: Redevelopment Plans

T3. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Communities, after apologising for not being in her place during questions to the Executive Office, for an update on the plans for the redevelopment of Casement Park. (AQT 433/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am assuming that Sinéad and Liz went for coffee and that is why the two of them are apologising for being late.

The update is that Casement Park is currently waiting for planning permission, which the Minister for Infrastructure and her officials are carefully considering. I met with the Ulster council of the GAA very recently. I also met the MP for the area and, indeed, his colleagues. I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever that everything that can be done will be done. Obviously, there will be an increase in cost, and we will find out what that is fairly soon. Hopefully, the planning decision will be made for Casement Park, and we can get on with developing the last of the three stadia for Belfast.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she give the House an assurance that she is committed to ensuring that this long-delayed project will be delivered urgently?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I want to give the commitment to you and everyone else, inside and outside the Chamber, that Casement Park is an absolute priority for me. As soon as the decision is made, one way or the other — I have action plans for both — hopefully we will get a favourable decision so that we can get on with the construction of Casement Park.

Housing Executive: Maintenance Delays

T4. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister for Communities, while appreciating the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions, whether she is aware of any delay in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive issuing awards to businesses to carry out work, including replacement windows etc. (AQT 434/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware of some delays. I know that there have been procurement challenges that have set back companies that were awarded tenders for

maintenance work. I am aware that the threshold is very low now, so it is easier to make a legal challenge on procurement grounds, so that is slowing the programme down, on top of the global pandemic. I have asked the same question as the Member, and I am waiting for a report on how that might be much better advanced.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. In relation to that, there are several companies in Mid Ulster that are finding it tight to get business and work across Northern Ireland. They have been awarded contracts but they are not fit to move on. I appreciate your response, and I ask you to press for a response on that as quickly as you can.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely will. I will take it upon myself to write to the Member as soon as I get an update on that issue.

Museum Sector's Recovery

T5. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the museum sector's recovery since its reopening, particularly in its visitor numbers. (AQT 435/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am going to ask for an update on visitor numbers because, although the museums opened up, and there is a lot of loyalty to museums, particularly the Ulster Museum, certainly numbers for all attractions, museums and even Titanic Belfast have reduced due to COVID. I will get an update for the Member and send it to him.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Minister. Is it likely that museums will benefit from the Department for the Economy's voucher scheme?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Well, if I know the head of museums, they will ensure that they seek out any opportunity to benefit from any scheme, regardless of which Department it comes from. Let me reassure the Member that museums are certainly on the list for the COVID recovery programme for culture, arts and heritage. They play a vital role. They are all struggling and need our support. I am actively looking to see what support I can give our museums, right across the board.

HMOs: Density

T6. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Communities, in reference to earlier questions and answers about HMOs, to clarify whether there are legal limits to HMO density in a particular area, including wards or district electoral areas (DEA). (AQT 436/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will tell you something that you already know: south Belfast and Coleraine have the highest densities of HMOs across the North. That is because of the universities, but it is still not good enough.

We need to look at planning and the concentration of HMOs in one area. That was the biggest issue that I was asked to look at until recently. Paula Bradshaw raised the issue of south Belfast, and the Holylands in particular. If there is a need to change legislation and regulations, I am going to have to have a look at that. There are too many gaps in the way in which HMOs have been given a licence, and then the regulations, and the planning decision, and we need to bridge them.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for that answer. Are you aware if there are legal limits? Is there an upper limit to what can be passed in terms of the number of HMOs in an area? If you are unsure, if you could look into it and let me know because I am struggling to find out.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is exactly what I will do because I am afraid of giving an inaccurate answer. I will find that out and write to you.

Social and Affordable Housing Targets

T7. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Communities for her Department's social and affordable housing targets for each of the next three years. (AQT 437/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will not be surprised to hear me say that I do not have those on me. The targets for social housing are far too low. They are miserable, to be frank. Affordability is also an issue. FTC has gone into co-ownership to support people in getting access to that, because there has been an underspend in FTC. Unless we do something radical about the targets for social housing, we are going to fail to meet them every year,

Mr McGrath: Given the housing stress across the island, and within the Minister's jurisdiction, what will you do to address those miserable figures?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will look at implementing procedures that will target areas in most need, and at a new policy to address the miserable experience of people on the housing list for five years-plus. In addition, Foyle and north and west Belfast, the worst-performing areas, will be looked at as a matter of priority.

Social Housing

T8. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister for Communities, after expressing his surprise at being called, given that he was listening so carefully to the Minister, for an update on how she intends to provide more social housing, particularly in areas of housing stress, albeit that she has probably just answered a similar question. (AQT 438/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Just to repeat what I said to Colin McGrath, and I can feel Fra's eyes burning into the back of Colin McGrath's head because he stole his question, *[Laughter]* I will commit to look at the areas of highest demand. We need to ensure that supply is increased to reduce that demand as best we can.

Mr Speaker: Given that you have had adequate time to get your composure back, do you want to ask a supplementary?

Mr McCann: On a matter that was just touched on, will the Minister consider reintroducing ring-fencing in areas of high demand for social housing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am looking at ring-fencing and other policy changes to try to increase supply to reduce demand for social housing, as well as looking at specific targets for affordability, particularly under co-ownership, and at how our FTC can be better spent to ensure that there are more affordable homes.

Casement Park: Overspend

T9. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Communities, in the light of the potential overspend of around £35

million that is projected for Casement Park, whether the subregional stadia programme for soccer will receive a like-for-like funding increase, given that, at the beginning of the process, it was stated that each sport would receive equitable finance and investment. (AQT 439/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am going to disappoint the Member and say that it is not automatic that that happens. Many big capital projects that we have dealt with have overrun on spending, and that is not good enough. I understand what he is saying, but it is not automatic.

If the figure is x amount, that will not automatically be transferred over to soccer. That is not my understanding at all.

3.30 pm

Mr Hilditch: Further to that, have you had any discussions with the Minister of Finance or the Executive on that position?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I have met the Minister of Finance to discuss subregional stadia. We are all looking at guesstimates, and until we bottom out the cost for Casement Park, we will be dealing with speculation. We are looking at addenda and finalising the business case for subregional stadia as well because things have changed since the first one was done. To be honest with the Member, do not assume that an overrun for Casement Park will automatically translate to the remainder going to soccer. I have not heard anything like that at all.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. That concludes Question Time. I invite Members to take their ease to allow time —

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier today, in questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I asked a question to junior Minister Kearney in response to question 3 from Mr Kelly. I did not receive a response or even an acknowledgement from the junior Minister. I think that I heard Mr Speaker saying to the Clerk that I did not ask a question. There were, in fact, two questions within my question, and I received no response. So, I ask for the Speaker's ruling or judgement as to why that did not happen.

Mr Speaker: I will review the Hansard record of that, Mr Buckley, and come back to you. I invite Members to take their ease to allow time for Members to prepare for the next item of business.

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

Executive Committee Business

Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): Molaim an rún. I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees, in line with section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill dealing with social security coordination as contained in the Bill that was introduced in the House of Commons on 5 March 2020.

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: The primary focus of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill is to end the EU's rules on free movement of persons in respect of Britain at the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020. These are currently retained in British law by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. This will mean that EEA nationals not resident in Britain at the end of the transition period, and their family members, will require permission to enter and remain in Britain under the Immigration Act 1971.

Immigration and freedom of movement within the EEA are excepted matters under schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and are the responsibility of the Home Office. However, the Bill also makes provision for the Secretary of State, the Treasury or a Department here, acting jointly, to make regulations to modify — for example, amend, revoke or repeal — retained EU law relating to social security coordination.

Social security coordination is part of the ongoing negotiations with the EU on future relations. The legislation in question is regulation EC No 883/2004 on the coordination of social security systems and its associated implementation regulation, EC No 987/2009; regulation EEC No 1408/71 on the application of social security schemes to employed persons, to self-employed persons and to members of their family moving within the community and its associated implementation regulation, EEC No 574/72; and regulation EC No 859/2003, extending regulation EEC No 1408/71 to nationals of non-EU member countries. Any changes to the coordination rules would apply only to people moving between the EU and Britain after the end of the transition period.

The British Government signed an agreement with the Irish Government in February 2019 that protects the social security rights of all Irish and British citizens moving within the common travel area. Freedom of movement is an excepted matter, and the current social security coordination regulations operate in the context of freedom of movement within the EU. The regulations are a somewhat complex web of excepted and devolved issues, including the determination of the state to which

contributions should be paid; competency for the awards of benefits; aggregation of contributions and the periods of residence for benefit entitlement; and provisions for some benefits such as child benefit, which are the responsibility of HMRC.

I understand that the aim of the British Government remains to seek a new agreement with the EU, and, in the event of a negotiated deal, it now seems that the British Government process is to replace the retained social security coordination regulations with a new reciprocal agreement. Reciprocal agreements are international treaties and fall within the ambit of international relations. As Members are aware, international relations are excepted matters. In the event of a deal, it seems, therefore, that the British Government propose to revoke the retained social security coordination regulations. The revocation would also apply across Britain under the ambit of excepted matters, including international relations. However, the negotiations are ongoing, and, until the negotiations are complete and a deal is agreed, we will not know the precise scope and content of the new agreement. If a deal is not agreed and there is no reciprocal agreement with the EU, retaining the power in clause 5 for a Department here to amend the coordination regulations may give us some flexibility over the limited devolved issues in the coordination regulations. Furthermore, clause 5 provides a power to make consequential amendments — for example, to address inoperabilities or inconsistencies that may arise from the modification of the retained social security coordination regulations. This provides a power to ensure the continued operation of domestic social security legislation that refers to, or is related to, the social security coordination regulations.

If the motion were not to pass today, it is anticipated that the British Government would move to amendments to remove the power of the Department here to make regulations under clause 5 of the Bill. That means that we would have no power to modify the retained social security coordination regulations in the event of no agreement on social security coordination being reached between Britain and the EU and no power to make consequential amendments to our social security law. The only option to obtain such a power would be to bring a separate Bill to the Assembly. There would be no power for the Assembly to amend the EU social security coordination regulations until such a Bill had completed its passage.

I am also aware that it is anticipated that there will be very significant demands across Departments for Bills to be progressed through the Assembly before the end of the current mandate, so retaining these provisions in the Westminster Bill would help to relieve some of the expected pressure on the legislative programme.

I know that Members will have seen the briefing provided by the Human Rights Commission in relation to the Westminster Bill. The commission has made a number of recommendations that, in my opinion, are well outside my remit, but I have written to the British Home Office urging the Westminster Government to give the Human Rights Commission recommendations serious consideration. I have weighed up carefully the arguments for and against these proposals, and, on balance, I have decided to move them today.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee thanks the Minister for

bringing this motion today. I am sure that all Members will have read the Committee's report, which was published on 8 July 2020, on the legislative consent memorandum on the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, but, just in case, I will provide some background and update Members.

The Committee was briefed by the Department on the main purposes of the Bill and on the legislative consent memorandum on 11 June 2020. The primary purpose of the Bill is to end the EU's rules on free movement of persons in respect of the UK at the end of the transition period, thereby bringing EEA nationals and their family members under UK immigration control. Members will undoubtedly have their own views on the specific issue, but it is important to emphasise that immigration and freedom of movement are excepted matters under schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and, as such, the Assembly has no powers to amend those laws that pertain to immigration and freedom of movement. However, the Bill will protect the status of Irish citizens in UK immigration law once free movement rights end.

As social security is a devolved matter, the NI Assembly does have a role in considering the social security coordination regulations, and that is really the focus of the memorandum. In particular, clause 5 of the Bill will introduce powers to enable Westminster and the Assembly to amend retained EU law governing social security coordination post EU exit. Clause 5 — consequently, schedules 2 and 3 to the Bill — was therefore the key clause for Committee consideration.

At its briefing on 11 June, the Committee was advised that the Executive had agreed to proceed with a legislative consent motion on this issue. Notwithstanding what I have just said regarding immigration and free movement of persons, the Committee recognised that the retained regulations are a complex mix of excepted and devolved matters and that a joint approach to amending the regulations — that is, between a Minister of the Crown and the NI Assembly — therefore offers the potential to amend the law in a coherent way. That is what the Bill will allow should the motion be supported today.

Members were assured that the devolved competence of the Assembly would be respected and that future subordinate legislation would require the approval of the Assembly. That is, of course, to be welcomed. There was some concern initially that giving Westminster the power to legislate on our behalf might somehow constrain the ability of the Assembly to legislate on social security matters. Therefore, during consideration of clause 5, members asked the Department about the viability or advantage of taking forward an Assembly Bill on these matters rather than agreeing to a Bill being taken forward by Westminster.

However, the Department assured the Committee that the Bill does not deal with the specifics of social security benefit but rather gives the Assembly the powers to make regulations in respect of social security coordination following a future agreement between the UK and the EU.

3.45 pm

Some members noted their general uneasiness with the use of LCMs in principle rather than bespoke Assembly legislation. It is not the way that we would prefer to deal with legislation, but we recognise that it is necessary in

this instance. I welcome the inquiry by the Committee on Procedures on the use of LCMs, and I am sure that the Committee for Communities will offer its view in due course.

The Committee then noted a draft legislative consent motion at its meeting of 1 July 2020 but recognised that, as a result of the Bill's being amended at Third Reading, the motion would also likely change. The Committee was also briefed on the amendments to the Bill, which were made in the House of Commons on 30 June. They did not reflect changes in policy but were required to omit references to the Scottish Parliament from the Bill to reflect the decision of the Scottish Government not to proceed with the LCM.

At its meeting of 8 July, the Committee agreed in principle to the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill as contained in the amended clause 5 and schedules 2 and 3 through an appropriate legislative consent motion. The Committee was therefore expecting the amended motion and was briefed on it by departmental officials at its meeting on 16 September. At that meeting, the Committee agreed to support the amended motion. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for bringing this to the Floor of the House. This has been discussed in Committee a couple of times, as the Chair has outlined, and I think that it is fair to say that I am not the only member who has been a bit cautious and maybe even a bit confused about committing to supporting this. That has been compounded, I suppose, by the arrival of correspondence from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission last week, which the Minister referred to, and I commend her on her action stemming from that.

I will seek some clarifications and assurances from the Minister, and I am sure that she is well able to provide them. My colleagues the MP for Foyle and the MP for South Belfast voted against the Bill in Westminster, and we have concerns about it and therefore, by extension, concerns about the Assembly giving our consent to it. Although the LCM deals only with the social security provisions of the Bill, I should take the opportunity to reiterate our opposition to the swathe of delegated powers that it hands to the Tory Government, the party of the "hostile environment", to establish a new immigration system after the transition period.

On the social security provisions, I have questions on which I would appreciate a clear response from the Minister. Can the Minister confirm — I think that she already has — that, if the Northern Ireland provisions were omitted from the original Bill, a further Assembly Bill would be needed to ensure that her Department had the necessary powers to amend retained EU law on social security coordination? As the Minister and the Chair of the Committee have alluded to, that would be preferable, as it would give this House the time to scrutinise those provisions and to set out our opposition to the immigration clauses. The SDLP wants the system to work, and we are conscious of the time pressures with the pending exit from the EU, but, to be frank, handing any powers over to a Tory Government should be a last resort.

I must say that the LCM is kind of difficult to square with the Minister's welcome recent confirmation that social

security powers would be returned here from Westminster, having been handed over by some parties here to the British Government at the time that the Welfare Reform Act was approved. The Minister has confirmed that the regulatory powers will come to the Assembly, but that raises this question: why not the primary legislative powers? If there is a reasonable explanation for these to be made in London rather than in the Assembly, now is the time for us to hear it.

The SDLP supports social security coordination with the EU and retaining EU provisions, given our border situation. I note the concerns raised by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission about the impact that paragraph 6 of schedule 1 may have on the payment of childcare within universal credit for working tax credit for cross-border workers who rely on childcare providers based over the border. I can think of families in my constituency to whom that would apply. The childcare has to be provided in the UK in order to access these elements, and it was EU law that addressed that discrepancy, not the common travel area. It is another example of the creeping "borderism" that Brexit has instigated for those who can least afford it. The Minister and the Assembly must be alert to that, and I am sure that many of us are. I will listen carefully to the Minister's response on the issue of how she will ensure that decisions on protecting practical childcare options for our cross-border workers are made here, not in London.

I urge the Minister to outline the implications of all of these issues and to explain why the LCM is absolutely necessary now as opposed to a Bill coming through the Assembly.

Ms Armstrong: As others have said, the primary purpose of the Bill is to end EU rules on the free movement of persons in respect of the UK at the end of the transition period, which is not too far away. We know that that means that EU nationals who are not resident in the UK before the end of the transition period will be required to obtain permission for themselves and their family members to enter and remain in the UK under the UK's Immigration Act 1971. It will come as no surprise that this is one of the areas that Alliance is least comfortable with and does not support. We support the four freedoms within Europe, but we are realists, and we absolutely recognise and realise that what is contained in Part 2, clause 5 is vital if we are to move forward social security payments for those people.

As the Minister outlined, had we to bring a Bill to the Assembly, it would take time, and, with the end of the transition period, we are heading into what will probably be one of the busiest periods that the Assembly will see for some years. I absolutely recognise, as others mentioned — Mark Durkan stole my thunder — the childcare issue raised by the Human Rights Commission with the Chair of the Committee. Going forward, we need to consider that. However, this time, even though we are extremely concerned about the implications for freedom of movement, the Alliance Party is content that the LCM should be passed and the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) progressed, as is necessary.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Minister for bringing the motion today. As my colleague Mark Durkan said, we have both specific and general concerns about the provisions in the Bill to which we are being asked to give legislative consent. Although the provisions that touch on devolved competence and therefore require our consent

do not relate directly to immigration — as has been said, immigration is an excepted matter — it is still worth putting it on the record — I intend to do so strongly — that the Bill is the legislative device that puts an end to many of the rights associated with freedom of movement. Representing a proudly pro-European party and constituency — it is a constituency that includes a world-class university with students and academics from across the EU and, indeed, many EU nationals in general — I put on the record my profound sadness and frustration that freedom of movement into Northern Ireland is ending. That is a profound loss to our society, our economy and our culture. Though the people in Northern Ireland whom we represent can still avail themselves of freedom of movement across the EU through exercising their Irish and EU citizenship, it is a tragedy that we as a society are losing the contribution, through inward freedom of movement, that so many EU citizens have made to our society. That is, in part, why, as Mark Durkan said, my predecessor, Claire Hanna, and our party leader, Colum Eastwood, voted against the Bill at Westminster.

I will move on to the specific provisions. Clause 5, which Kellie Armstrong just mentioned, is on social security co-ordination, and there are clear legal reasons why much of that has to happen. However, what we are being asked to give legislative consent to requires the Minister to give us a little more detail on exactly why she has chosen to bring forward an LCM rather than discrete legislation. First, though we appreciate that it is a complex area of law, given the clear statement from the Department that it would prefer to properly exercise social security powers at a devolved level, why was the decision made to agree to Westminster taking the power to legislate rather than legislate at Stormont? It would also be helpful if the Minister could give us a little more detail on how the legislation interacts with the common travel area. Earlier provisions in the legislation — not the parts that we are being asked to give legislative consent to — set out the rights of Irish citizens, which is welcome. However, there are clearly issues that need to be explained in respect of how it interacts with the common travel area. It would be welcome if the Minister could say a little more about that. I know that she alluded to it in her opening remarks but it would be helpful if the Minister gave a clear statement on behalf of her Department as to why it chose not to introduce primary legislation here and, rather, accept an LCM, given that she said that its preference was to exercise social security powers at the devolved level.

We have heard specifically from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission about gaps in cross-border childcare provision and universal credit. Could the Minister say something about how that will be addressed? I know that she is already writing to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

More broadly, we will do lots of this in the months to come. It is really concerning that we are doing it at such a fast pace. We seem to be getting into a vicious cycle of having to do things quickly because there is not enough time to scrutinise and then not having enough time to scrutinise because there is loads that we have to get through. It reinforces itself, and it is not helpful. I accept that that will happen across the Executive in multiple Departments. That is why it is important that the First Minister and deputy First Minister give a clear statement to the Assembly about the volume of primary and secondary legislation that

Committees and plenary will have to get through in the months to come.

Hopefully, we will have a deal and not complete chaos on 1 January 2021. However, even if we have a deal, it will not be good enough if, in the new year, we have specific bits of difficulty and disruption that come from substandard scrutiny in the Assembly. We will have to explain to our constituents why we rushed through legislative consent motions and secondary legislation without the proper scrutiny. In that spirit, I would like to hear a little more from the Minister on some of the subjects that I have touched on.

Ms Bailey: I cannot support the LCM because the Bill repeals the main retained EU law relating to free movement and brings EEA nationals and their family members under UK immigration controls — controls by which, as has been pointed out, the UK Government have deliberately created a hostile environment. It is another reason why Brexit is not good for Northern Ireland.

Let us not forget that we meet today in the midst of a public health crisis that has pulled back the veil on the deep inequalities and unfairnesses in our society and shown the extraordinary value of what so many workers do for our families and communities. Making excuses that we are just too busy or that we cannot foot the bill as reasons to allow this to pass without taking responsibility is pretty shameful. The Bill will send a powerful message to people that the UK Government do not consider them to be welcome here — our shop workers, our refuse collectors, our local government workers, our NHS staff, our care workers: not welcome. Of course, they are welcome. Those who were out clapping for the thousands of EU nationals in the NHS and care sector are now sending the message that they are no longer welcome. That is not fair, and I, for one, cannot support it.

The Bill will destroy opportunities for future generations and split even more families apart. It will result in many thousands of EU nationals losing their rights in the UK. It will copper-fasten the hostile environment even further. The Bill brings to an end the one part of the UK migration system that works well: the free movement of people. Pushing ahead with the Bill in the midst of a public health crisis is badly misjudged and shows that the UK Government are completely out of touch.

The primary purpose of the Bill is to end for the UK, at the end of the transition period, the EU's role in the free movement of people.

Those rules are retained in UK law by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act. The ending of the rules on free movement will mean that EEA nationals who are not resident in the UK at the end of the transition period — New Year's Eve this year — and their family members will require permission to enter and remain in the UK under the Immigration Act 1971.

4.00 pm

We should have had a Bill that makes it simpler instead of harder for the NHS, the social care sector and other sectors to recruit the staff that we need, not one that uses financial thresholds as a poor substitute for skills, experience or contribution. We should have a Bill that sets out a comprehensive system of visa extensions for those front-line workers and their families. We need a Bill that scraps the minimum income requirements for family visas, suspends other financial thresholds and acknowledges

that migrant families and workers, just like so many other workers, have had their incomes reduced. That is not this Bill, and therefore I cannot, in good conscience, support it.

We have witnessed, time and again, that the Tory Government care none for the principle of consent, and today everyone in this House should oppose this Bill.

Mr Allister: This is the first debate touching upon Brexit issues in which I have sensed any reality coming upon this House. It is very well having all the bravado of opposing a Bill such as this in Westminster, and the SDLP and the Alliance Party preening themselves as great Europeans who are defending the principles of free movement and berating the idea of the United Kingdom controlling its own immigration policy and its own borders. Yet, here they are today. Courtesy of a Sinn Féin Minister no less, this Assembly is about to, quite correctly, endorse the fundamental principles of Brexit, namely that the United Kingdom should control its own immigration policy and its own borders. How luxurious is the irony that it is a Sinn Féin Minister who is bringing to this House that very proposition; that this House should consent to legislation in Westminster that does that very thing? That is progress, it is good and it is the first dose of reality, and it will not be the last, touching upon Brexit. Some say, "Vote down this Bill". Well, if you vote down the Bill, you vote down the survival of the rights of Irish citizens to social security. Is that what they want? I do not know.

Let us be very clear; Brexit always was a national issue and it always meant that this nation of the United Kingdom was going to have to take some unitary decisions. Those unitary decisions, touching upon immigration and borders, are central to the Bill, and all those who paraded themselves as the people who would never accept those implications of Brexit will be among those who today will go through the Lobby, if a vote is called, to vote for the Bill. That is good, and I look forward to further reality in the House.

Mr Carroll: People Before Profit unequivocally opposes the Tories' Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill. More widely, we oppose Boris Johnson and the Tories' nefarious plans for restricting freedom of movement into Britain and the North of Ireland.

British immigration policy has always been based on exploitation and structural racism, and it is deeply worrying that the Tories wish to repeal laws in way that inevitably harks back to even more racist immigration policies from the 1970s or perhaps worse and aims to implement a points-based system that mirrors the racist practices of many other countries across the world. In particular, we oppose clause 1, which ends freedom of movement from EU countries, replaces it with nothing and opens the door to an even more restrictive immigration system.

To be frank, I am no big fan of the EU as an institution. On the matter of immigration, it has a terrible record in some regards, as thousands of dead migrants in the Mediterranean Sea illustrate in a tragic and painful way. That said, although the EU has a shocking record in the treatment of refugees outside its borders, the freedom of movement between EU states is one principle that should be robustly defended. As a socialist, I am opposed to borders and divisions generally, whether they are erected across states or inside people's heads, and I support the freedom of movement of people across the world, not just

in Ireland or Europe but everywhere. If the rich man can move freely across the globe, so too should the poor and marginalised be able to avail themselves of such a right.

The main thrust of the Bill, however, is to ensure that legislation for free movement across the EU will be repealed and, afterwards, EEA citizens and their families who come to Britain will be subject to immigration laws and require permission to enter and remain. The Tories have set out their stall, as others indicated, towards a future immigration points-based system, which, in my opinion, will be inherently racist. For example, one piece of government-commissioned advice states that only the “brightest and best” talent from around the world will be allowed entry. That is Tory speak for shutting the doors on people who are fleeing war, poverty and climate destruction, all of which were a great responsibility from British imperialism. The Bill may have partially addressed the long-standing question over the Irish community living in Britain, but it jeopardises the lives of thousands and thousands of other migrants living in and entering Britain in the period ahead.

We oppose the Bill because it represents a dark day for immigrants and refugees who are in search of a better life. The Bill is being pushed through Westminster. The LCM relates to the provisions being devolved to here. I recognise that some in the Chamber — the Minister may have indicated this already — who oppose the Tories’ Immigration Bill have, in effect, made an argument for passing the LCM, in that it may allow the Assembly to make the most of a bad situation that is being forced upon us and to influence social security payments. I respectfully disagree with that argument and believe that it is a mistaken approach to take, as it represents endorsing dangerous legislation. I urge Members to look closely at the recent report from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which states that there is no secure protection for those who will have a settled status prior to the closing date of the scheme in June 2021 and:

“Nor is there any provision for safeguarding the rights of those EU citizens and EEA migrants who arrived before January 2021”.

In addition, clarification is needed on how the changes of rules will apply to Irish citizens in Britain.

We should have no truck with this Tory Bill. Every method of resisting it should be utilised, including rejecting the use of a legislative consent motion. The parties in this Chamber should unite to obstruct the Tories’ plans as much as they can. I note that the Scottish Parliament has until now refused to implement an LCM on these provisions. I suggest that the Executive could also follow that path and, instead, as others said, introduce their own Bill that addresses social security payments for immigrants. That should include a rapid expansion of social security payments for all in need. It is still unclear to me why the Executive could not have done that. For all the talk of needing to implement a racial equality strategy, the truth is that the Executive have presided over the shocking treatment of refugees and asylum seekers for many years.

I say this: open the borders now. Céad míle fáilte to refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants. I reject the Tories’ approach to immigration. The Assembly should step up to defend migrants and refugees in a way that offers a positive and equal future for all.

Ms Ni Chuilín: I suppose that it was inevitable that, once the LCM was brought forward, people would use it as an opportunity to talk about their opposition to Brexit. I have no issue with that. What you all need to be clear about is that this LCM is to ensure that benefits get paid in the event of a no deal. I know that you know that and that you are making politics. That is fine; that is what the Chamber is for. Let us at least be honest. Giving powers to Westminster in the first place was done so that you could bring half a billion pounds of protections to mitigate the worst impacts of the Tory Government. Let us be honest about that, too.

We are bringing powers back, and if I had an opportunity, I would not be doing this, but, frankly, folks, I am not about to cut people off at the knees over rhetoric. It is all well and good for people to get up and say what they would and would not do, most of which I agree with, but at least I am honest. So be honest and be honest with integrity about why you want this not to happen. I understand. It is anti-Brexit, so I am with you on that, but the rest is guff, and you know that it is guff.

There should be an opportunity to bring bespoke legislation, but that has slipped because of COVID and everything else. I agree with you on this: there needs to be better social security legislation here that we have the ability to scrutinise in order to protect people who are worse off. That should be a *raison d’être* for us all. That is what we all agree on.

I am not going to go into who said what. This is simply about the power to make regulations on the basis of no deal so that people are not left with no child benefit or benefits. Sin é. The rest of it is about free movement. That has nothing to do with me, and it has nothing to do with this either, although I agree with your whole issue.

In relation to everything else that was said, I will faithfully, as I think I have done till now, try to get a proper response to any queries that have been raised. I want to be on the record challenging some of the things that were said as well as giving information. With that, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees, in line with section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill dealing with social security coordination as contained in the Bill that was introduced in the House of Commons on 5 March 2020.

Private Members' Business

Children with Hearing Difficulties and Deafness

Ms C Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of early detection, intervention and support for children with hearing difficulties and deafness; acknowledges the negative impact that delay can have on their future educational attainment; and calls on the Minister of Health to take immediate steps to identify and address urgently the backlog of postponed audio appointments and cancelled cochlear implant procedures that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

Ms C Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, and good afternoon everyone. As we have just come through International Week of the Deaf, I thought that I would attempt some sign language in support of children, young people and adults who may be watching the debate. Recently, the Minister for Communities committed to bringing forward to the Assembly sign language legislation once co-design and co-production work have been completed. In response to a question for written answer, she informed me that the legislation will be built on the principles of equality and social inclusion and on ensuring that the deaf and the hard of hearing community have the same rights and opportunities as those in the hearing community and are able to access services in their own language.

Hearing is one of the most important senses that we have. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen the number of people who are waiting for diagnostic testing soar. The latest figures, which were published by the Department of Health's information and analysis directorate in June, reveal an almost 150,000-long waiting list for diagnostic tests. Faced with such a backlog and knowing that, for many people, these are life-saving tests, it is easy to see why almost 8,000 people who are waiting for hearing tests might not be at the top of anyone's list. I argue that they should be. Diagnostic tests in order to identify hearing impairments may not be life-saving, but they are profoundly life-affirming, and for young children late diagnosis and delayed intervention are likely to have a lifelong adverse impact.

4.15 pm

The evidence is clear. Early detection and intervention lead to better outcomes in language acquisition — whether spoken or sign — in young children's emotional and cognitive development, and closes any educational attainment gap between hearing and non-hearing pupils. Late diagnosis amongst the young can result in a level of disadvantage that they may carry for the rest of their lives, leading to poorer educational outcomes, worse employment opportunities, and more ill health, including mental ill health.

Right now the new school day could prove detrimental to the education of children not yet diagnosed. The need to juggle learning and follow new school safety measures is very worrying in an already stressful situation.

It is now imperative that we wear face coverings as we go about our daily lives, and that in itself is another barrier to children and adults awaiting a diagnostic test. Where once they may have been reliant on lip-reading to engage in conversation, now they are unable to. That new added barrier and complication must be taken into consideration to alleviate the anxiety that it must cause. It is now vital that the Department of Health and the Department of Education work together, as required by the Children's Services Co-operation Act to urgently oversee the development of an action plan to address any backlog of children with delayed diagnosis of deafness, and it is essential that parents and children have a role in building that plan.

This invisible condition requires regular screening to ensure that the problem is detected sooner and in the hope of a better outcome. Therefore, it is of prime importance that the Department of Health ensures continued vigilance regarding children's hearing.

Diagnostic testing, or the fitting or adjusting of aids, cannot be carried out remotely. I will mention some real-life experiences of children and their parents during the past seven months, such as parents not being able to reach trust support services when hearing aids break, and parents and carers having to pay for micro-suction for the child when appointments are cancelled.

Recently, a parent from the Western Trust area informed the National Deaf Children's Society about having contacted the audiology department because her son's moulds did not fit. They were able to send out new moulds adapted from the previous pattern, which worked out very well. However, the lady knew other children who were not so lucky. One child had loose vents, causing infection, and the only action was to prescribe, unseen, antibiotics which led to recurring infections because the problem with the vents was not addressed. Those are only some of the issues that have been highlighted by parents and carers with the National Deaf Children's Society.

Remote audiology does not work for children who have hearing difficulties or who are deaf. It has serious implications for the early intervention that is needed. I believe that, currently, there is no framework for paediatric audiology in the North. From what I have read, in 2018 the Regional Audiology Forum agreed that it would develop a set of quality standards for paediatric audiology services, to be applicable from birth to 18 years. The Department of Health was then to sign off on it. Will the Minister take this forward, in light of the increasingly lengthy waiting lists? It could go some way in ensuring measurable and continuous improvement of services, whilst improving access for our children and young people.

In supporting this motion, Members will be adding their voices to calls to the Minister of Health to take a moment, amongst the clamour of tackling the impact of COVID-19, and help around 8,000 young and not so young people to get their hearing test and take action to address postponed cochlear implant surgery. We need seamless access to hearing health services, without interruption or restrictions. I call on the Assembly to support the motion.

Mrs Cameron: I thank Members opposite for bring this very important issue to the fore and for securing this motion today.

If we were to make a list of impacts of COVID-19 we would be here well into the night, but when it comes to prioritising and rectifying those impacts, difficult decisions have to be made. Certainly in our health service, faced with wide-ranging disruptions, that is not an easy task.

Last week the Executive announced the intention to redress the crisis in cancer care, and that is right: it is life or death. I very much welcome that focus, but we must recognise quality of life impacts too, and the life opportunities impacted upon, and that is why I believe today's motion is so important.

Across Northern Ireland today, there will be parents who are sick with anxiety about the health and welfare of their children who need intervention to address deafness. As each day goes by, the despair grows greater for some, and we simply cannot allow that to continue. For the sake of health, education and employment outcomes for those who are affected by deafness, we must focus on getting appointments back and meeting the need. The figures show that education outcomes are not as high for children who are deaf and none of us should accept that. Rather, we should be asking why and then setting about addressing that inequality. The reality is that early intervention is proven to help deal with that imbalance. That is why the motion and the call to action are so important.

Audiology appointments need to be ramped up. We need testing back on track and we need our health service at large to get back to face-to-face appointments because virtual appointments simply do not work in this case. We also need to be aware of the new challenges that are faced by our deaf community. The prevalence of face masks in society now poses a real challenge in communication for those who lip-read. I commend my colleague, the Education Minister, for factoring that into his decision-making on masks in schools. Society at large needs to take similar cognisance of that.

Like so many areas of the health service, we need a speedy return to service in this particular field. Early intervention is proven to help those children and young people and we need to make sure that intervention is, indeed, early, and that it allows that potential to be fulfilled socially, educationally and in employment. We support the motion.

Mr McGrath: I thank the proposers of the motion and I support it. Here we are, six months later and coronavirus has altered just about every facet of our daily lives. We have all had to evolve and adapt and change the way in which we go about our lives in order to flatten the curve and save lives. We have all had to make sacrifices, but what of those who have additional health needs? How have they had to adapt in the current crisis? I am speaking specifically about children with hearing difficulties or deafness and the implications of coronavirus on early detection, intervention and support for those children.

Over the last six months, early detection and intervention appointments have had to be postponed or, at worst, cancelled altogether. Most cochlear implant surgery has been cancelled altogether and there are now more delays in the diagnosis of children with hearing difficulties.

We all know that language issues can be particularly contentious in the North, but we can all at least agree that language development for our children is key and critical. For children with hearing difficulties, that is even more important.

I welcome that new-born screening is considered as a red flag and has been taking place in the past six months. However, the overall consequence of coronavirus has been that a number of people will have missed appointments during these last months or have had them cancelled or have not been able to access them at all. There will be people who have fallen through the cracks and it is essential that we identify who they are so that we can remedy that. That could involve carrying out the necessary screening for children who were not born in a hospital so that they can have diagnostics done and have their hearing aids fitted and adjusted in remote or in safe clinical settings. Effectively, we could use local community care settings to carry out those procedures.

While we are here today to bring the motion to the attention of the Health Minister — as seems to be so often the case this week — there are elements of the motion that are of particular importance for other Executive Ministers and I have no doubt that the Health Minister will relay them to those Ministers. In these days of remote and virtual experiences, that will be more important than ever.

For instance, the Health and Social Care Board is taking steps to introduce a video relay service (VRS) that will allow those with hearing difficulties to make telephone calls using British or Irish sign language to our health services. That is an important step forward. However, we know that those in England and Scotland have had access to that for some time. It is good that we are finally catching up, but, at present, the service is strictly limited to health services, and it has only been in place from May, so it would be good to see that developing.

The Communities Minister should consider how those with deafness or hearing difficulties could make phone calls, using VRS, to benefits offices, and the Education Minister should consider how they can make telephone calls to the Education Authority about their children's schooling. I know that that is more for adults, but there are lots of different ways in which we can intervene to help.

I welcome the news that the Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon, has approved a new dynamic PPE purchasing system that services the entire public service and that included on the list are transparent face coverings, which people have asked for as well.

The time of coronavirus has also opened up a shift to homeworking, and those with hearing difficulties need to be supported as much as possible through this. That is one of the impacts of coronavirus that our new head of the Civil Service, whomever that is and whenever they are appointed, could take on board.

The most important thing is that those in our community with deafness or hearing loss feel that their dignity is being acknowledged and that we as legislators smooth the way as much as possible and remove every obstacle that we can to allow them to live their life as fully as possible. That begins at childhood, with early detection, early intervention and early support. I support the motion.

Mr Chambers: I welcome the motion because it enables us to register our acknowledgement of the importance of early detection, intervention and support for children with hearing difficulties or deafness. As the motion points out, deafness or hearing difficulties can have a negative impact on a child's education. The various delays that the motion identifies are hugely regrettable, but, like many aspects of our health provision, we need look no further than the impact of COVID-19 to understand the problems that it gives our health service in trying to cope with waiting lists, right across the spectrum of medical conditions. There are no easy solutions nor magic-wand cures for the reality of the disruption that COVID is causing to many aspects of our life but especially in connection with routine and planned medical care.

It is reassuring, as seen in a personal family situation recently, that newborn babies are still receiving all the tests that they normally receive, including audiology tests that can pick up hearing problems at a very early stage. That early detection is vital.

Hearing is one of the most important faculties that we have. Living in a silent world cannot be a pleasant place to be. Many of us may have seen the videos circulating on social media of young children and babies who have been fitted with advanced technology hearing aids that take them out of a previously silent world. The amazement and sheer delight on the children's faces when their mother speaks to them on the first occasion on which they can actually hear her voice would touch the coldest heart.

I am confident that the Minister will support the motion and take every step open to him to address the delays in appointments. It will not be an easy road for him to travel as he grapples with delays across all the medical disciplines. It must be acknowledged that he inherited a health service that was operating on the pure goodwill of everyone employed in it. Nurses were forced to stand on picket lines in the middle of winter to highlight their issues, morale throughout the system was low, and waiting lists were at an all-time high. None of those issues could be nailed to Minister Swann's door, and when he came into office, he pledged to address all outstanding issues as quickly as he could. COVID-19 put paid to the fullness of those plans.

If progress is to be made, it will require the cooperation of everyone in the House, not least his Executive colleagues. We must accept that it will be a case of taking baby steps as we go forward into a winter that may bring more major disruption to all health services. Hopefully, aspirations such as those expressed in the motion can be progressed. The public have a role to play, as do those in the House. Members also have an obligation to provide leadership as our public health services try to reduce the transmission of coronavirus.

If a major and disruptive second wave can be avoided, it will be because of the continued and admirable adherence to guidance and advice by the public. To those who demonstrate outside this building and speak about the pandemic as being some sort of hoax or overreaction of government and who point to the reduction of medical interventions across the board, I say, "Wise up" — I know that I have stolen those words from previous Members — "Follow the guidance and help speed up the return to normal service that we all crave, especially in the field of children's health". My party fully supports the motion.

4.30 pm

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion. Children with learning difficulties are, of course, all different, but one thing that unites them is a desire to live as independent a life as possible. Like everyone else, they want to influence the world around them and develop healthy and stable relationships. Sometimes, it can be the smallest detection or intervention that enables that. That will, of course, usually mean interventions that affect the whole family, particularly when the children have been born to hearing parents. Empowering parents to make informed choices, for example, on treatment or communication options is one of the small but vital interventions that are necessary early on. Another, as we heard, is the relatively minor implant procedures that can have such a major impact. Another is the audio appointments referenced in the motion, which enable those informed choices to be most effectively made.

This is, of course, about future educational attainment, as the motion states, but it is also about so much more. One area of particular concern is the impact that the absence of some of these small detections or interventions will have on mental health, immediately and in the future. Data on the area is not good, but it is estimated that 40% of children with hearing difficulties develop mental health problems, nearly double the incidence in the general population. The main reason for that, research suggests, is communication deprivation. That is exactly why, as the motion states, audio appointments and implant procedures are so important. Delays add significantly to overall stress and strain and, ultimately, to the prospect of falling behind peers and subsequent poor mental health.

The four-tier spectrum of mental health provision from early advice at primary level through to specialist assessment and services, multidisciplinary teams and, finally, specialist outpatient or inpatient units is established and is vital for all children and even more so for children with hearing difficulty. If even tier 1 is not happening, the impact can be long-lasting. That means that child and adolescent mental health services, specialised for children with hearing difficulties, had never been more important than before the pandemic; the pandemic makes them even more so. The particular issue, it seems, is that, if the early interventions do not occur and the referral to specialist services — directly to do with hearing or even in an area such as counselling — does not happen, the impact can be long-lasting. Again, a small intervention missed means that a significant problem can develop.

This is the concern when we hear lines like "Urgent procedures are being prioritised". A minor implant may not seem like an urgent procedure; an early assessment of communication may not seem like an urgent procedure; an audio appointment, the outcome of which will help the family unit make empowered decisions, may not seem like an urgent procedure, but any of those steps taken now may well avoid the need for urgent procedures later. They will also enhance a child's sense that they can influence the world around them and live as independently as possible, with all the positive effects that has on their mental well-being and that of those around them.

In closing, I place on record my appreciation of the work of the audiology staff and the speech and language therapists who are trying their best in an environment of COVID, staff vacancies and the waiting lists that we

have discussed today. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what steps will be taken urgently to ensure that children with learning difficulties do not miss out on basis interventions and procedures that would ensure that they do not suffer from communication deprivation, with the inevitable consequence for mental health and education.

Mr Easton: I support the motion. Communication is fundamental to the development of every child. Learning good communication skills early in life is key to positive relationships with family and friends, good mental health and happiness and educational and employment opportunities in the future. It is particularly key for children who are deaf or have hearing impairments. Early detection, intervention and support for children with hearing difficulties has been shown to improve their mental health and avoid the behavioural problems known to develop in children who do not receive adequate help. Lack of support in communicating can also result in poorer cognitive development and negatively impact on the relationship between the child and their parents. The backlog of postponed and cancelled appointments due to COVID-19 has the potential to have a knock-on effect in the short and long term for children with hearing difficulties. That is why the issue must be urgently addressed, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss the matter.

Before the pandemic, the health service was already experiencing issues with paediatric audiology services. An assessment was carried out last year from which it became clear that some health trusts struggled to meet the standards of access to the services, including the waiting times they had been set. The South Eastern Trust, for example, which covers the constituency I represent, scored just 58% towards the service accessibility target. The report highlighted the need to improve waiting times at this point. Recent figures show that the situation is likely to get worse rather than better. ENT has shown one of the largest waiting-list increases of any speciality between August 2019 and this year. With shops, cafes and restaurants yet to open for business properly, it is time that the health service started to follow suit, particularly in this case, where early detection and intervention are crucial to ensure the best care plan and outcomes for these children.

With cochlear implants, early detection and intervention is especially important. Research has shown that children with implants inserted before they are six months old possess a vocabulary on a par with or better than that of hearing peers by the age of five. Conversely, when an implant is inserted later than this, that equivalence with their hearing peers is lost. Naturally, that can have a significant impact on a child's first experience of school, their learning outcomes and the development of their social skills. It is, therefore, vital that those procedures go ahead as soon as it is safe, and I encourage the Minister to look at the issue with urgency.

Most parents of deaf children have no experience of deafness. Early diagnosis allows parents to make informed choices about treatment plans. It allows parents to educate themselves on how they can best learn to communicate with their child, support their child to learn the social skills that they will need when they enter school and how they can expand their child's vocabulary.

The disadvantage that deaf and hearing-impaired children face in education already is obvious. One only needs to

look at the statistics. Only half of deaf children make the expected progress in maths and English at Key Stage 2, compared with over 90% of their hearing peers. Just over one third of deaf children obtain five GCSEs, compared with nearly 70% of their hearing peers. While, just over 1.5% of 16 to 30-year-olds have a form of hearing loss, fewer than 0.4% of those in higher education declare having such a condition. The evidence shows that the gap has widened in recent years and has not improved.

While all children have lost out on vital schooling due to the pandemic, it will have an even greater impact on deaf and hearing-impaired children. My worry is that the gap will continue to grow. There are around 1,500 deaf children in Northern Ireland, and 90% are born to hearing parents, many of whom struggle to communicate with their child and will not be able to educate them adequately at home without support. Speech therapy, which is sometimes available through school, has also been missed. Staff members and classroom assistants who help children on a day-to-day basis at school have not been able to do so. COVID-19 has already seriously impacted on the learning of these children, who are often left behind. The least we can do is ensure that they have access to the healthcare that they need.

For deaf and hearing-impaired children, the pandemic causes ongoing problems. Face masks cause issues for those who rely on lip-reading and facial expression to communicate in their schools. Restrictions due to COVID-19 have created an isolating and lonely time for many. For a child with hearing difficulties, starting a new school —

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

Mr Easton: Given the ongoing challenges that these children face in the coming months, it is only right that we do everything that we can for them. I call on the Minister of Health to urgently address the backlog of appointments and surgical procedures.

Mr Gildernew: I welcome the interest shown in the motion and the tone of the debate. I would welcome any reassurance that the Minister can give the Assembly, the deaf community and the wider public that any backlog in diagnostic audio testing, which is fundamental to gaining access to interventions such as sign, cochlear implants or other social or medical support, will be identified and addressed as quickly as possible. For young people, the earlier the intervention, the better the outcome. I think that that is widely recognised across education, health, in communities and all sorts of areas. The earlier we get in, the greater the impact and the greater the difference.

There is evidence that many children with hearing impairments do less well in education than their hearing peers. That is not inevitable. It is something that we can and should do something about. I recognise that the Minister has, in Committee and in other places, flagged up his interest in dealing with health inequalities. I also recognise that COVID-19 has impacted on our ability to deal with health inequalities as we would have liked. However, I ask that we guard against people slipping further back, as Alex said, and that we try to protect those who are vulnerable at this time.

The development of language and communication skills is vital to children. During my training as a social worker,

we had the benefit of sensory impairment training. I had started out believing that deafness and hearing difficulties were an absence of sound, but, actually, they can also be confused or intermittent sounds that can be very disorientating and could easily, as was mentioned, have an impact on mental health. That is a concern as well.

Studies show that early access to language, whether through sign or interventions that improve hearing, allows a child to develop an understanding of how language works. That means that they are hearing or reading-ready when they begin school and can map their understanding of how language works onto the written page. If we give a child the right tools and support, they will close the gap between non-hearing and hearing pupils and, as a consequence, improve their future economic chances. Improving their economic prospects lifts people out of poverty. As we have discussed in the Assembly, inequality harms the individual primarily, but it also harms the community and our economic development, which is relevant across the sphere. Poverty is a costly alternative to early intervention for life changes, future health profile and public health. I am aware that there is significant research evidence in the United States and elsewhere that every pound invested in early years can, over a lifetime, save up to £17. That is a crucial area for intervention.

I note that the National Deaf Children's Society has noted its disappointment at the lack of detail in trusts' phase 2 plans for audiology and implant services.

The motion rightly focuses on the urgent need for early diagnosis for the young, but I am sure, a Cheann Comhairle, that you will not mind my mentioning that it is also important that older people get access to timely audio diagnosis. Just last week, we debated a motion on dementia, and the Assembly was supportive of the need to develop dementia-friendly communities. However, there is growing evidence that late diagnosis and intervention for older people experiencing hearing loss can be a factor in the onset of dementia. I hope that the Minister will keep that in mind. I welcome the support from all sides of the House for the motion and urge everyone to support it.

Ms S Bradley: Like my colleague Colin McGrath, I support the motion. The motion rightly refers to the negative impact that delay can have on a child with hearing difficulties and on their educational attainment. However, I would like to go further. Any delay to a child during its formative years can create a downward spiral that can quickly get out of control. Trying to keep up with their peers and those around them can move a child into a very lonely place. They may not know or fully understand that they have a hearing impairment. Their family, parents or caregivers will be in deep distress until they can put their child on the right track to find the tools to equip them to deal with their deafness or hearing loss.

When that confidence is knocked, it can present in the classroom or formal caregiving setting as a child who presents with what is noted as being disruptive behaviour. It is very unfortunate and unfair to disadvantage a young child at such an early stage in their life.

4.45 pm

When we look at a delay in action versus the action itself, it is not all doom and gloom. There is much to be said for the positive outcome that can come into play when a child

is supported and identified through early intervention and help. I will mention the audiologists who support these children during difficult times and empower them with the tools they need to make their way through life.

I acknowledge that the Minister introduced the video relay service (VRS) system in the health service in May. Many will know that the deaf community in Northern Ireland appreciated that system, but it was six years late. I will not go into why the system was late. I will reference the comments made by my colleague Colin McGrath, who said that every Minister at the table has a role to play in supporting the deaf community in Northern Ireland.

On 27 August, I wrote to the Minister for Communities seeking an assurance that she would look into the VRS system, VRS for All, that is being used elsewhere and allows for calls to be made to public- and private-sector bodies to support the deaf community. It is a very sad reflection of our times when the deaf community has to lobby Members of the House because they feel left out. The bulk of the problem was not about COVID, but I appreciate that the task before the Minister is very much about catching up post-COVID with where we need to be. I recognise that the Minister will have a lot of pressure on him, and he will have to prioritise what piece of work comes first. However, based on the fact that these are young children in their influential and formative years, I urge him to bring this to the top of his work priorities.

Mr Butler: I thank the proposer of the motion for bringing it to the House today. My party and I will support the motion. I also welcome the tone of the debate so far.

When I was a member of the Health Committee, the National Deaf Children's Society lobbied heavily and brought to the fore something that many of us are ignorant about, and that is the pressures faced by the deaf and hard of hearing community when accessing just about everything. I know that many Members have touched on some of those difficulties, but we need to bear that in mind when we discuss the motion. The motion points directly to early diagnosis, identification and the much-needed support for not only the children but, crucially, the families.

At the Health Committee, I learned that 90% of children who are diagnosed as deaf or hard of hearing come from a family where there are no hearing difficulties. So those families are not equipped with the skills, knowledge and resources to deal with the challenges being faced by those young people. You will know that the Minister has made an early commitment — even during COVID — to make mental health and well-being a significant priority. The impact on those who are deaf or have a hearing difficulty is that they are four times more likely to suffer from poor mental health, anxiety and loneliness. I know that Sinéad Bradley will testify that it is one of those societal hurts and pressures that we are facing, and the deaf community will understand what that means. That isolation is not just in terms of family or work; it is an issue that is felt society-wide.

The pressures in education have been well addressed. There will also be barriers with regards to employment prospects if we do not address the issues early. There should be no barrier to anybody doing what they want to do if we can get the help in early. We need to give those young people as much of a vision and aspiration as we can.

I think that Colin McGrath talked about the need for cross-departmental working. When it comes to this issue, it is absolutely evident; I do not think that anybody will say that that is not the case. He picked out the need, for instance, for Communities to ensure that there are no barriers and that it is easy for people to access benefits. He even gave some credit to his Minister with regard to infrastructure and transport. Those things should not be seen as barriers, but, until you speak to some of the advocates for adults with hearing difficulties and deafness, you do not realise that, sometimes, things are missed. I pay tribute to those working in the Health Department, including the trusts, who provide help and assistance to the community and voluntary sector, and to the National Deaf Children's Society for giving us some information on this issue today. It is key to remember that it is about early identification, early diagnosis, early remedial action and, most importantly, early support to give those children the best chance and start in life.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call the Health Minister, Robin Swann, to respond. The Minister has up to 15 minutes.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the Members for proposing the motion, which provides us with the valuable opportunity to consider the importance of early detection, intervention and support for children with hearing difficulties and deafness across Northern Ireland. I echo many Members' comments in regard to the tone of the debate and the contributions.

I have listened closely to the Members who have spoken in support of the motion. I, too, support the motion. As Minister of Health, I understand fully the unprecedented impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on our health service. Our collective and immediate focus, quite reasonably, centred our response on coronavirus, but, as Members indicated, our tremendous health service and the people who work in it have remained steadfast in their work and ongoing efforts to maintain services, where possible, while still taking steps to fight the virus.

I fully acknowledge the continuing need for early detection, intervention and support for children with hearing difficulties and deafness. I advise Members that the newborn hearing screening programme has continued to operate right throughout the pandemic. All those babies who failed their newborn hearing screening have had their diagnostic auditory brain stem response testing completed within the four-week target. That is a specialist test to provide a more detailed assessment of a baby's ability to hear. The service has completed 134 such tests since 1 April. In paediatric audiology, those children classed as clinically urgent are still being assessed within 10 weeks of referral. Around 200 hearing tests for children classed as urgent have been undertaken, alongside 100 virtual assessments and reviews of children who regularly use hearing aids. Routine appointments in paediatric audiology, like many other specialities at this time, have experienced delays. However, every effort continues to be made to address that matter through the use of remote appointments or face-to-face appointments where a remote appointment is not appropriate.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, unfortunately, resulted in some appointments being postponed due to the need to ensure the safety of patients and staff alike in these most challenging of times. The Belfast Health and Social Care

Trust paediatric audiology service and the paediatric auditory implant service, which is responsible for cochlear implants, have continued to deliver services to children classed as clinically urgent since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The services provided are delivered in line with national professional guidance and public-health guidance on the safe and appropriate delivery of services during the pandemic. As has been indicated, many of the consultations have, where possible, been completed virtually, with safe processes put in place to maintain social distancing, including the appropriate use of PPE for any child who requires a face-to-face assessment.

An extended working day and six-day working are examples of the service being flexible and open to change in order to address the developing backlog. Children with auditory implants are able to avail themselves of technology, so their devices should be programmed remotely to help ensure that their continuing development and hearing potential is maximised. Anyone whose child has issues or problems with auditory implants is able to contact the service directly, and the child will be managed appropriately and without delay, so if the mover of the motion has specific examples or wants to make my office or the Department aware of any specific cases, I am more than happy to follow those up. I can advise Members that I am informed that there are no children awaiting a fitting of a hearing aid. Any child using a hearing aid who has an issue or problem is also assessed and managed appropriately and without delay.

It is the case that there have been some cancellations and patients being rebooked as the service reacts to the impact on staffing levels, risk assessments, and bed and clinical availability during the pandemic. That is likely to continue, but our health service will continue to deliver services to those children who require urgent assessment and treatment. The service is delivered by a small cohort of specialist audiologists and clinical scientists. Any staff absence therefore impacts directly on the ability of the service to provide assurance on an indicative time frame for managing clinical and routine patients, as was the case before the onset of the pandemic.

Although the health service is doing its level best to maintain paediatric audiology services during the pandemic, I am clear that more needs to be done to tackle waiting lists. I have already referred to the use of virtual assessments, where patients can be seen in triage. Those new ways of working will have to be with us going forward as we continue to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. I am committed to reducing waiting times for those specialist services and to providing virtual early intervention to ensure that children with hearing difficulties can benefit from the excellent support that our health professionals can provide.

Services will require non-recurrent investment in order to bring waiting lists back to an acceptable level. That, however, will be in the medium term rather than the short term, as the main difficulties during the pandemic are with staffing and facilities' capacity, and that is not expected to change over the next six months.

Members will be aware that my Department, the Health and Social Care Board and the National Deaf Children's Society have worked collaboratively to draft quality standards for paediatric audiology services for Northern Ireland, and we expect those to be adopted and published

later this year. The Regional Audiology Forum, acting as the steering group and working with stakeholders and user representatives, has now completed that work and produced the draft paediatric audiology quality standards. The standards are going through the final approval process. They will enable the quality of the service to be evaluated and benchmarked to identify target areas for service improvement focus. That will be particularly welcome in these very challenging times.

In supporting the motion, I thank all Members who have made contributions. It remains vital that we address in a timely way the needs of those children with hearing difficulties and deafness. I thank all the professionals working in our paediatric audiology service, our paediatric auditory implant service and our health and social care trusts, who continue to work tirelessly in these unprecedented times.

Mr Sheehan: Will you confirm whether I have five or 10 minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Ten minutes.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat. Tá áthas orm bheith ag labhairt sa díospóireacht seo inniu agus ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil le gach aon duine a bhí ag labhairt anseo inniu. I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate. I thank everyone who contributed. I especially thank the Minister for his response and for coming along today to listen to the debate. I welcome his acknowledgment that more needs to be done to tackle waiting lists, particularly in those specialist areas.

As has been noted, there is consensus right across the Chamber today on the motion and the issue involved.

Unfortunately, that will not get a lot of column inches tomorrow, and there will not be any sensationalist radio shows congratulating us on agreement in the Chamber, but that is life, I suppose, and we just have to deal with that.

5.00 pm

I was on a Zoom meeting this morning, and I suppose that most of us have experienced difficulties in this Building with the Wi-Fi. I was using my laptop and the signal kept dropping in and out. I was picking up bits and there was background noise and everything. It was while I was half preparing for this debate and I was thinking that that is the experience of people with hearing difficulties. They do not hear everything; background noise interferes and they experience those difficulties on a daily basis.

I was away a few years ago with a crowd of lads — we were away on a weekend at a match or something. As usual on those occasions, there was a bit too much alcohol consumed and the company was loud and a bit raucous at times. I noticed that one of the lads, who was usually the life and soul of the party, was sitting in the background, and he seemed down in the mouth for some reason. I went to speak to him and he explained to me that he had been having hearing difficulties and that he was waiting on a new hearing aid. However, with all of the noise he could not engage, communicate or hear what was going on, and I just thought that for a lad who was always so happy-go-lucky, he was so demoralised. Imagine that situation for people who have hearing loss and who do not get treated.

Colm made the point earlier about making sure that people with hearing difficulties are treated with dignity, and the

way to do that is to ensure that there is early intervention. Practically everyone who has been involved in this debate has talked about early intervention because the earlier that you intervene then the better that the outcomes are.

Of course, in the overall scheme of things, some people may not think that this debate is very important. When we are in here debating big-ticket issues like Brexit, global pandemics and so on, this may seem like very small beer in comparison. However, we have to think about the implications of this.

Educational under attainment among young people with hearing difficulties was mentioned. What is the upshot of that? I know, and any of you who have been involved in the Committee for Education will know, that when children fall behind in school, for whatever reason, it is often very difficult for them to catch up again. What then happens is that they continue to fall behind and they end up leaving school with no educational qualifications. What is the upshot of that? People end up more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system, to have chronic ill health and more likely to suffer mental ill health. That was one of the points that Robbie made about isolation and loneliness. I think of my friend in a crowd of 10 or 15 other fellas, who was sitting outside of their company and not able to participate or communicate, with that sense of isolation and loneliness. In a sense, that is a microcosm of the whole issue of hearing difficulties and deafness that we have to deal with.

The ramifications of hearing difficulties and deafness are much more profound than just, "Oh, tough luck, those kids couldn't get their hearing tested or their implant". It is much more profound than that. I think that when we are dealing with issues like this, then all of us should not be thinking about somebody else's kids, but our own kids. How would we feel if our children had hearing difficulties and could not get the early intervention and treatment that they need, deserve and are entitled to?

I take on board Alan's point: the Minister came into his job with all the good intentions of the world, and COVID-19 put paid to a lot of those issues. I do not want to raise a discordant note. As the Minister said, a lot of the consultations and treatments cannot take place because the safety of patients and staff, and so on. However, the ordinary layperson will wonder why a service such as this, which, I understand, is carried out by audiologists who are technicians — if I am wrong, I stand corrected — cannot happen. There is no aerosol-generating procedure involved, as far as I am aware.

I remember when I was at primary school. We used to get hearing tests on a regular basis. You put on a set of earphones, a noise came through and you tapped the table with a pencil. Apparently, it has advanced and you now press a button instead of tapping the table. I make a light-hearted comment about that, but the serious point is that ordinary people do not understand why some of these tests have been cancelled. It is not as if audiologists are being dragged into the front line to deal with COVID. I am sorry that I did not get the chance to ask the Minister that before he spoke, but it is a question that I am putting out there.

I know that I have not mentioned a lot of Members. Everybody who spoke mentioned underachievement in education and issues around mental ill health. I think it was

Colm who mentioned the fact that last week was dementia week and that there is a suggestion that loss of hearing is a factor in dementia in older people. All of those issues make this a much more serious issue than it would appear on the face of it. Again, I thank everybody for contributing to the debate and the Minister for coming along.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of early detection, intervention and support for children with hearing difficulties and deafness; acknowledges the negative impact that delay can have on their future educational attainment; and calls on the Minister of Health to take immediate steps to identify and address urgently the backlog of postponed audio appointments and cancelled cochlear implant procedures that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease while the Speaker resumes his place.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: A point of order, Mrs Long.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I take this opportunity to correct the record in relation to the discussion that we had this morning. It has come to my attention that, in response to a question from Jim Allister earlier this afternoon, I inadvertently referred to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) having raised a question in 2012 about the removal from schedule 2 to the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 of a reference to section 52 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. I should have said that it was the Northern Ireland Court Service, in September 2011, and that the departmental solicitor responded in March 2012. The PPS was not involved in that correspondence, and I apologise to Members, to Mr Allister and to the PPS for the error.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister for that very speedy correction of the record from earlier on, which has observed the courtesies of the House.

Private Members' Business

Helen's Law: Introduction of Equivalent Legislation

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the ongoing pain and trauma experienced by families in Northern Ireland whose loved ones have been murdered and who continue to have no knowledge of the whereabouts of their remains; welcomes the progression in the UK Houses of Parliament of the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill, otherwise known as Helen's law, placing a statutory obligation on the Parole Board to take into account an offender's non-disclosure of such information when making a decision about their release from prison; notes that these obligations apply to prisoners serving a sentence for murder or manslaughter, or for taking or making an indecent photograph of a child; and calls on the Minister of Justice to introduce urgently equivalent legislation in Northern Ireland to ensure that prisoners convicted of murder and child sex offences are not eligible for release until they disclose the location of their victims' remains or the identity of their victims.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one and a half hours for this debate. The mover of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr Easton: This is a very important motion. It is vital for families who have had a family member or loved one murdered, but have never had a body returned for Christian burial. That is why I state from the start of this debate that the motion is not political in nature. There are no hidden agendas and there must be no politics in this debate, because of the families. I ask the Assembly to back the motion wholeheartedly as we seek to support those families and to send out a message to those who have killed someone and refused to give up the body: "You will stay in jail".

What is Helen's law, or Charlotte's law? It is killers who have concealed victims' remains, who have been sentenced for the crime of murder and done their time, but who then face parole refusal. Murderers who refuse to reveal the location of their victims' bodies could be denied parole under a new law. Helen's law follows a campaign named after Helen McCourt, who was murdered in 1988. Her killer, Ian Simms, has not revealed the location of her remains. Miss McCourt, aged 22, disappeared in 1988 on her way home from work. Simms was convicted of murder, but never revealed the location of her remains so he can continue to have a hold over the family. He was jailed for life in 1989 and told that he would have to serve at least 16 years before he would be considered for parole.

Nearly 600,000 signed a petition launched in 2015 calling for the introduction of Helen's law to block parole for killers who conceal the whereabouts of their victims' bodies. Mrs McCourt, who is still involved in searches for her daughter, said:

"It has been a terrible stress on me since I started the petition in 2015. This law will help so many other families. I wrote to him, begging him 'please, please

just tell me and you will not hear from me again'. I still hope he will remain in prison until he tells me. I hope one day I will know."

Unfortunately, it has come too late for the family, as the process of this law through Westminster has not passed all the hurdles, and Simms is now out on licence. Here in Northern Ireland we have a separate justice system, and much of what we ask for and support today will require our Justice Minister to support and introduce it. I hope that she will not be found wanting, because my hopes, and those of the victims' families, rest on her shoulders today.

In Northern Ireland we have our own equivalents of Helen McCourt. We have the Murray family. Johnny Miller was found guilty of murdering Charlotte Murray, his former fiancée. He must serve a minimum of 16 years of his life sentence. Charlotte's body was never found. Miss Murray's family said Miller had put "a cruel suffering" on their family by not revealing where her body was.

I met the Murray family with the First Minister. The family have called on all local politicians to bring in the law to prevent killers who conceal the whereabouts of their victim's body receiving parole. It is working its way through Westminster. Charlotte's identical twin sister Denise said:

"John Miller murdered our sister and he knows what he has done. We ask of him to tell us where Charlotte's body is and let us bring Charlotte home. We want to say our goodbyes in peace."

5.15 pm

Another such family in Northern Ireland is Lisa Dorrian's family. Lisa Dorrian, a 25-year-old shop assistant from Bangor, went missing in my constituency in 2005. She was murdered and secretly buried, and her remains have never been recovered. The 25-year-old was at a party in Ballyhalbert caravan park, which was deserted because it was off-season. Mark Lovett, the last man to see her alive, was also there drinking and taking drugs. Detectives believe that Lisa was strangled in the Ballyhalbert caravan and her body secretly buried.

The family of missing murder victim Lisa has come out to support the proposed law, which would keep convicted killers behind bars until they revealed the location of their victim's body. They say:

"We are sending a direct message to the man who hid Lisa's body. We just want to find her. We have asked you, begged you through the media for 15 years to tell us where you hid her body When we get a guilty verdict from the jury, we will make sure this law is in place so that you are never released from prison until you tell us where Lisa is."

The determination and dignity of the local families of those who have been murdered and the location of whose remains is unknown are what drives the debate. We in the Chamber must give them real hope that their genuine concerns will be met not just through our words but through our actions in the Assembly. Ultimately, the debate is about how we support the victims of serious crime and value their grief and trauma.

The Minister should not lose sight of what is at stake. It is not a time for deflection and sidestepping. Non-disclosure of victims' information should always be taken

into consideration. It is vital that any decision to release a prisoner who is serving time for these serious offences makes statutory consideration of a failure to disclose their victim's whereabouts or identity. The Minister is correct that those matters are routinely considered, but, if that is the case, why should we hesitate to put it into law? Routine statutory consideration alone cannot change outcomes and decisions; there also need to be binding obligations on parole commissioners to give non-disclosure and the added trauma to victims' families greater weighting in assessing risk to the public. Someone who fails to disclose that information is a greater risk to the public than somebody who has done so.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that it is not only a hideous crime to prevent a family from laying to rest their loved one but to deny them knowledge of the final hours of their loved one's life? That disclosure, in itself, would, at least, put to rest that aspect of the heinous crime of murder.

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his intervention. When those who are involved in murder do not give up the location of the body after being sentenced, it shows me that they are not genuinely sorry for their actions. It is important that those disclosures take place.

It seems that victims' health and well-being are not prioritised compared with the risk to the wider community. That is wrong. Helen's law may act as a driver for offenders to cooperate and disclose information early. We believe that there is an opportunity for offenders to provide accurate information on the location of their victims' remains or the identity of their child victims earlier if decisions on parole are seen to differ on the basis of disclosure versus non-disclosure. The problem that we have is that such a distinction is not readily made in current decisions. It is vital that offenders have an understanding that non-disclosure at each stage of the criminal justice procedure will lead to stricter penalties than if they disclose.

There needs to be an overhaul of the current process to ensure a victim-centred approach at every stage. However, the delay in processing the sentencing review continues to be of deep concern to victims and, indeed, many who work in the courts. We cannot kick the can down the road any longer. Parole decisions are more sensitive than sentencing because, if officials get it wrong, release of the uncooperative perpetrator can cause new and ongoing trauma to their victim's family.

We welcome the focus of Helen's law on serious sexual offences where the victim is not identified. The number of recorded sexual offences against children in Northern Ireland has reached an all-time high, according to statistics procured in 2019. In that 12-month period, 2,036 sexual offences against children were recorded, a significant rise of 34%. That is just unacceptable.

Finally, I am frustrated and disappointed by the Alliance Party's amendment. It is clear that the victims of the families were not listened to. I appeal to the Alliance Party to withdraw the amendment. The amendment states that the issue is:

"already routinely considered by the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland when assessing prisoners' suitability for release on licence".

If that is the case, why should we hesitate to put it into law? This is not in every case, so why has Simms been allowed out on licence? The amendment deflects focus from the current limited Department of Justice consultation with stakeholders and sentencing review and is less committed to bringing forward dedicated legislation. The Minister of Justice has already commissioned a focused consultation with key stakeholders on Helen's law. A consultation makes no guarantees or commits the Minister to bring this into law. The amendment uses words such as, "including legislation where appropriate": what type of language is that to use in the case of murder and loved ones having no body returned to them? There is nothing more appropriate than the Assembly listening to the victim's family and making this law.

In conclusion, I urge the Assembly to reject the amendment and to support the motion. I also urge the Assembly to show that it is serious about being tough on crime.

Mr Speaker: I call Kellie Armstrong to move the amendment. You will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Armstrong: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after the first "child" and insert:

"acknowledges that such matters are already routinely considered by the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland when assessing prisoners' suitability for release on licence; and further welcomes that the Minister of Justice has already commissioned a focused consultation with key stakeholders on Helen's law, to run in parallel with finalising the outcome and next steps flowing from the sentencing review, including legislation where appropriate."

Before I speak on the amendment, I start by acknowledging the pain and trauma felt by the families of Charlotte Murray and Lisa Dorian and all families who still wait for their loved one to be returned to them. To deny a family the opportunity to say goodbye is cruel. I say directly to all those families, "I will not pretend to understand your ongoing pain. All I can say is that I am sorry".

I thank Mr Easton and Mr Givan for tabling the motion. There is much that I can agree with in the motion. The Alliance Party and I welcome the progress of the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill in the UK Houses of Parliament. That law, known as Helen's law, is vital. However, the motion before us today goes far beyond what the Bill at Westminster includes. Preventing a prisoner from being eligible for release because they have not disclosed the location of their victim's remains could mean that there are those who are genuinely innocent who would be, in effect, imprisoned in perpetuity. It also does not allow for prisoners who genuinely cooperate but are unable to locate the remains due to the passage of time, loss of memory or difficulties finding distinguishing features and landmarks in the area. You would also find those people trapped in prison for ever. Whilst we may believe that a long prison sentence is commensurate with their brutal and cruel crimes, that would not reflect the sentence as handed down by the judge and would almost certainly be open to challenge on human rights grounds.

We can improve on the content and intent of Helen's law. I know that the Minister of Justice is already committed not to equivalent legislation for Northern Ireland but to more than that. My amendment confirms that there is a consultation under way. There is a sentencing review. The legislation will be brought forward where appropriate. The amendment that I move acknowledges that the parole commission already takes matters into consideration when considering release. However, I do not think that anyone in the House wants the parole commissioner to just take into account or consider an offender's non-disclosure of remains or identification of a victim of illegal images. Surely, we should seek to have a weighting added to that consideration. Would it not be better to take into account when a prisoner has made no attempt and given no explanation for that lack of cooperation when weighing the risk that they pose to the public on release. While some in Westminster called for no disclosure to mean no release, that has not been included in Helen's law. If we bring Helen's law into Northern Ireland, it will not include that clause. It states only that the Parole Board "must take into account" non-disclosure. The resistance to doing so was to allow the Parole Board there to continue to take its own decisions. To deny parole, even on those grounds, would mean a fundamental change to the basis on which the Parole Commission makes release decisions and, indeed, would potentially impact on the framework for public protection sentences. I think that we all agree that the parole commission should be able to take decisions on the basis of its independent consideration. Politicians should not be able to interfere in sentencing.

As outlined in my amendment, the Minister and the Department of Justice have already commissioned a focused consultation with key stakeholders on Helen's law, and that is to run in parallel with finalising the outcome and the next steps flowing from the sentencing review, including legislation, where appropriate. Indeed, I will ask the Minister to confirm in her response today whether there is an opportunity to enable the parole commission to do more than it does today, which is to consider an offender's non-disclosure when making a decision about their release, and whether we can add a weighting to its decision. No-one in this room wants families to wait any longer for their loved ones to be returned to them. I do not believe that any of us in the Chamber want non-disclosure to be simply taken into account. That is why the amendment goes further than the motion and asks the Minister to take forward her consultation, sentencing review and legislation and not just to replicate Helen's law.

As I said, I thank the DUP Members for tabling the motion. It is a private Member's motion, and the discussion today, no matter what happens, will not bind the Minister of Justice or any Minister to take action. I suggest that, if we are to take this forward, we need to have meetings with the Justice Minister and, perhaps, the Justice Committee could take it under its remit as part of its work. Perhaps, then, we could have an outcome that enables the parole commission to continue to do its work and families to contribute to the outcome.

I have proposed an amendment that reflects the ongoing work of the Department of Justice. I say again that it has a consultation, there is a sentencing review, and it seeks legislation to be taken forward where appropriate, because I believe that Helen's law will not deliver what families want. Families do not need further pain or distress. Helen's

law will not keep offenders in prison for non-disclosure. I ask all Members to consider voting for the amendment.

Ms Dillon: I do not think that there will be very much between what any of us in the Chamber say today, regardless of whether we support the amendment, because we all support the spirit of the motion. I think that is fair to say. There is little in the motion that we cannot support, but there is a bit. We will support the amendment, but we will not push it to a vote. I just want to make Members aware that that is our position.

I want to begin by thanking the families of Charlotte Murray and Lisa Dorrian for coming here and meeting me and my party colleagues, as, I am sure, they met representatives of the other parties. Our deepest thoughts and sympathies are with those families and the many others like them who do not know the whereabouts of their loved ones' remains. We cannot even begin to imagine the compounded pain of not having the remains to lay to rest and to have somewhere to visit them. Everyone should have that right. I call on anyone who can give information to give any family peace of mind to, please, come forward with that information to allow them to establish the whereabouts of the remains of their loved ones.

The motion before us today, while it asks for equivalent legislation to Helen's law, appears to go further than Helen's law and, in doing so, potentially strays into the realm of indeterminate sentences, which contravene human rights law. Kellie Armstrong has already outlined the issues around that, so I do not intend to repeat that. I fully support the spirit of the motion, and, as I said, there are only a few words in the motion that we cannot support. I spoke at length with the families over the weekend, as they, too, accept that the amendment does not go far enough and gives no firm commitment on the next steps that will address the issue and meet the needs of the families.

The amendment may allow the Department to put this on the long finger when what we need is the beginning of a process to produce effective and robust legislation that will deliver for the victims and their loved ones.

5.30 pm

Regardless of the outcome, this debate is only the beginning of the process. The motion is non-binding. If the House does not pursue the Minister and Department to deliver, and insist that she begins to scope out what legislation would look like, then all we are doing is making politics and raising the expectations of families that are campaigning and are the voices of their loved ones, and this is just not acceptable.

I met the families and spoke with them at length over the weekend. They are determined, articulate and intelligent people fighting a dignified campaign. They will not have the wool pulled over their eyes by Members or the Minister. We owe it to them to work together to deliver legislation. This issue cannot simply be lumped in with the sentencing review because there are elements to this that are not addressed by the review, particularly the continued offending in relation to child sex offences.

I call on the Minister to commit to a bespoke piece of work outside the sentencing review as a matter of urgency. It is the intention of the Minister to meet the families. It is imperative that the Minister progresses this in a positive

and proactive manner. Charlotte Murray's killer was sentenced to a minimum of 16 years. If the Minister and Department of Justice do not bring forward legislation to address the motion, the reality is that although the Parole Board will consider the non-disclosure of her remains, there is nothing in statute to send a signal to the perpetrator of that horrific killing and the Parole Board to give it significant weight.

We will support the amendment and we will not oppose the motion.

Ms S Bradley: As the SDLP's spokesperson on justice, I support the motion. Appropriately, it opens with reference to the trauma experienced by families whose loved ones have been murdered and who have no knowledge of the whereabouts of their remains. I acknowledge the ongoing pain being experienced by the families of Lisa Dorrian and Charlotte Murray, alongside the families of the disappeared, but, in particular, all those families that continue to live with the unimaginable pain of not being able to lay the remains of their loved one to rest.

Non-disclosure of the identity of children who were used to take or make indecent images also provides an insight into the level of remorse a prisoner feels when they make no effort to help those who simply want to safeguard that child. Our legal system requires a method of marking out those prisoners who choose to continue with the dehumanisation of their victims and who choose to inflict pain on loved ones by not disclosing critical information about the victims. Helen's law does just that. It is a carefully crafted piece of legislation that includes a level of subjectivity, allowing the Parole Board to make a determination on when a prisoner is making a deliberate decision not to disclose information.

The explanatory notice provided ahead of the legislative change acknowledged that it was:

"established Parole Board practice to consider the non-disclosure of relevant information by offenders in cases involving living victims".

The Prisoners (Disclosure of Information about Victims) Bill established that practice in statute. Prisoners in England and Wales are now aware that continued non-disclosure must, by statute, be considered during any deliberations on parole. Prisoners who may never act out of anything other than self-interest will be forced to contemplate the consequences of continuing with their decision to withhold information.

The SDLP has no hesitation in supporting the motion, even if it does suggest contemplating the legislative process going further than Helen's law. I would add that we could consider the possibility of reflecting any delay in a prisoner's chosen time of disclosure to be reflected in the timing of their parole. The right thing to do here is to push ahead and legislate with these deliberations.

To those who have expressed a concern that the removal of eligibility for people may not be human rights-compliant, I remind them of two points. First, a parole board would be charged with making the determination as to whether this is a deliberate decision not to disclose. The subjectivity rests firmly with it. Secondly, those murderers or paedophiles who deliberately chose to continue to perpetrate the crime through non-disclosure, at all times, it is them and nobody else who hold the power to make

themselves eligible for parole. Helen's law, or Charlotte's law, as it is lobbied here in Northern Ireland, is the tool that forces the hands of those into doing the right thing. Victims and their loved ones depend on our support to make that happen.

The SDLP welcomes the fact that the Minister has already commissioned a focused consultation with key stakeholders on Helen's law. The level of deliberations and considerations that formed the legislation in Westminster will inevitably assist in injecting speed into any Northern Ireland deliberations. For that reason, the SDLP believes that it would be wrong to subject this mature legislative piece to sit alongside the timeline of a much wider sentencing review. The urgent need to deliver on this legislation cannot be emphasised enough. It is a relatively short Bill with a huge impact. For that reason, we cannot support the amendment.

In supporting the motion, we send a clear message to all those commissioned to sit on a parole board that the direction of this House is to legislate on this matter, and the weight of non-disclosure during their deliberations should be used with absolute confidence.

The SDLP supports victims via this motion.

Mr Beattie: First of all, I thank Mr Easton for bringing the motion to the Assembly. I know that he has put a lot of time into it and into supporting the family. I met the families of Charlotte Murray and Lisa Dorrian for the first time last week. I sat opposite Charlotte's twin sister, and I saw in the family's faces the absolute devastation that they are going through day after day not knowing where their sister is.

Mr Dorrian, the father of Lisa, sat with the family in support, knowing that he has not even reached the first step to getting any form of closure or justice, but he sat there and he gave support all out of hope. Hope is a word that I will use a lot. They sat with hope that we as an Assembly and as legislators could do something to address this great injustice. They gripped on to hope that we would do something. Their concern is that any murderer who refuses to divulge the whereabouts of the victim can receive parole and walk our streets still knowing where that victim's body is and not be held to account.

The parole board and the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland can, when the parolee goes before them, say that not divulging the whereabouts of the victim is a reason for parole to be denied. It is an aggravating factor. However, there is no guarantee because that was not the guarantee for Helen McCourt. There was delay after delay, and her murderer was allowed out and is walking the streets now. Not only that, but Helen's mother had to pay him £40,000 because she took a legal case to try and keep him in prison. It is absolutely disgraceful. It is shocking, and we do not want to go down that road.

It did not work for Vanessa George, who was released after 10 years, having abused children and taken pictures, and then refused to divulge who the children were that she abused. In later life, they may well recall what went on, but she is out walking the streets knowing who those children are.

The purpose of sentencing is punishment, protection of the public, deterrents, rehabilitation and reparation. Sometimes we forget about deterrents. I have said it time and time again: what is wrong with an all-life sentence? It

is in the sentencing review, it can be considered, and we can do it. This is one reason why I think that we should do it. Here is the reality for Charlotte Murray's family: they will suffer a living death every single day for the next 16 years. Until Charlotte's murderer goes before the Parole Commissioners, they will not know whether he will get parole. They will not know. They have to suffer that for 16 years. If he is denied parole, they have to wait and suffer for another two years before he is up again for parole. It is inhumane — absolutely inhumane. We should be clear in telling him, "If you do not divulge where the body of your victim is, you will not get parole".

I said that the family live in hope. We all know the limitations of any legislation. Of course we do. However, let us not snuff out the family's hope, because it is all that they and other people have. I will support the motion, but I cannot support the amendment because it snuffs out hope, and there is no requirement for it.

Earlier today, a previous Justice Minister, Claire Sugden, asked a simple question: why can we not approve a legislative consent motion to adopt the legislation that is bound for England and Wales? Why not? Why not show purpose and strong justice? Why not put something in place? If it means a whole-life sentence — do you know what? — it has to be a whole-life sentence. It does not happen very often, but it can happen. I believe that when everybody in the Assembly thinks about it, they will think that it is right that, if you kill somebody and bury their body and do not divulge where the body is, you should not be allowed out of prison.

Mr Frew: I commend my colleague Alex Easton for his opening remarks and also the spirit in which the debate has been conducted, with some very powerful contributors voicing their opinions. I value that. I really value the parliamentary spirit in which the debate is taking place. At times like this, you feel proud to be an MLA. I believe that most if not all of us want the same thing. We may take different routes of travel, but we want exactly the same thing. That said, it was Lord Castlereagh who said that he despised:

"the ... parade of parliamentary spirit, which led to nothing".

It is on all of us to make sure that something happens after the debate. We can all argue and debate the motion and the amendment, but we need to make sure that we come together to send a message to those victims and loved ones that we are with you, we hear you, and we want to make a difference to your lives. That would be a very powerful message for those loved ones.

When someone commits the heinous crime of murder or unlawful killing, or is involved in sexual violence towards or abuse of young people, it is a heinous crime. An act of murder may be a one-off action, but it brings misery to loved ones forever and a day. However, a perpetrator who commits murder has a certain power. They may have that power inside them, and, in some hideous way, they may enjoy it. If they do, the power over information becomes much more sinister. Sinéad Bradley said that a prisoner's non-disclosure is a deliberate decision.

It is a deliberate act, and that act heaps more power onto the perpetrator, but, not only that, it impacts on the family every second of their lives. It rocks them to their core every

second of their lives. Some of these people are elderly and they have to live with this and face this every waking second of their lives. How could any of us ever manage to fathom what that means for loved ones who are facing this cruelty? For these loved ones, it is a sentence that they will never, ever overcome. They will never, ever get over it, yet the perpetrator will sit in there and decide upon a deliberate action not to disclose.

5.45 pm

What would that disclosure bring? It will not bring their loved one back. Absolutely not. However, it would allow the family to lay to rest the remains of their loved one, but, not only that, as I said earlier, it may well help to piece together the final hours and minutes of their loved one. Horrendous as that may seem, they will be able to piece together that story and maybe even some of the experiences of their loved one as they went through their final hours. That is a horrendous thought and story, but that would bring so much closure to the loved ones of the murdered, and I cannot for the life of me understand why it is not natural to place a duty on the parole board to take this into statute.

It is not good enough to place this in a sentencing review. It has to be much more than that. It is the essence of power that a perpetrator wields on a family, not just on the murdered victim but on the family of the murdered victim. We cannot abide that. The House should not abide that. The House can do something about it. The Minister of Justice can do something about it, and —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Frew: — I plead that —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Frew: — we will move on and produce something for the loved ones today.

Ms Dolan: First, I send my condolences to the families of Charlotte Murray and Lisa Dorrian, whose courage and persistence has seen this issue being brought here today. I am totally sympathetic to the need for additional protections to safeguard the rights of victims and their families, and I fully support the families in their search for truth and justice.

Whilst taking another person's life is one of the most serious and horrific crimes, I consider one wilfully holding back information regarding the whereabouts of a victim's remains is another offence and a continued offence. Therefore, there is a serious need for additional protections to prevent such an offence continuing.

When dealing with the issue of child sex offences, there are a number of additional concerns that warrant immediate attention. In relation to indecent photographs of children, unless the identity of that children or those children is known to the authorities, there is a real risk that the child might still be suffering abuse at the hands of child sex offenders, and we must do everything in our power to prevent that abuse happening. Further still, for as long as a photograph is in existence and the identity of the child is unknown, it is continued abuse, which may continue to have a serious and long-lasting impact on the child, including in later life. Everything must be done to track down the victims of these crimes to ensure that appropriate support can be provided to them, and also to ensure that the abuse is not continuing.

Innocent families who are suffering immensely already should not have their grief compounded as a result of offenders continuing to torture them by not disclosing information on their victims. We need to find legislation that has the result of compelling offenders to disclose information about their victims and also has a dual functionality of being a proper, effective deterrent to prevent offences like this being carried out in the future. All victims are entitled to truth and closure.

We are determined to find legislation that makes it much harder for offenders to be released if they have not disclosed information about their victims, and we are determined to find legislation that is effective and robust.

Our test in setting out what would be an acceptable piece of legislation is threefold. First, that it effectively compels offenders to disclose information around the whereabouts and identities of their victims. Secondly, that it acts as an effective deterrent to any future offenders carrying out such heinous and horrific crimes, and, thirdly, that it is robust, human rights compliant legislation that will not be open to legal challenge in the future, legislation that effectively considers and mitigates against any potential unintended consequences.

I do not believe that the original motion does this, however I do commit to working with the Justice Minister to move this work forward urgently. I would like to see the consultation committed to in the amendment carried out urgently, and we would like to see the outcome of this consultation before committing to a way forward. Any legislation must satisfy the key tests that I have just outlined if it is to be effective and suitable.

Mr Speaker: Members, as the business on the Order Paper is not expected to be disposed of by 6.00 pm, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the business is completed.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I am grateful to the families of Charlotte Murray and Lisa Dorrian for taking time to speak with me and my party colleagues. I think that their physical pain is clearly seen, and I cannot even begin to imagine the emotional and psychological torment that they are experiencing. I also think this evening of the family of Arlene Arkinson, who I understand signed the petition and support this Bill. Her killer went to his grave keeping that secret.

The act of disappearing a victim's remains is such a heinous crime that I think it is still deemed to be a war crime under the Geneva Convention. Some Members have already alluded to coercive control, particularly in relation to the murder of Charlotte Murray. This is a continuation of that coercive control and power, and we are all being better educated, I think, thanks to the work around domestic abuse and violence and getting a better understanding of its forms, other than physical assault, that many victims of domestic abuse have to suffer.

We are pleased to be able to support the motion. I believe that it is the right thing to do. I think that it gives the right message, particularly to those who have been convicted. In speaking to the two families, particularly to Mr Dorrian, it was very clear that, as I have found to be common with the many interactions that I have had with victims' families, if they had to choose between truth and justice, they would want to go for the truth by getting the victim's remains returned. That says a lot. Whilst the family of Charlotte

Murray have got some level of justice, they very clearly do not have closure.

In her contribution on the amendment, Kellie Armstrong talked about landscape changes, how difficult it would be and the indeterminate nature of the sentence. Other Members have talked about the sentence not being human rights compliant if it were to be a condition on parole. The earlier that the perpetrator speaks up before there are those landscape changes, the sooner that not only the victim's remains could be returned to the family but the sooner the perpetrator will have done the right thing and can go to a parole hearing having done the right thing.

I do not want to forget to talk about child pornography and child identity, which is dealt with in the second part of the motion. Any of us who are members of the Policing Board hear constantly about the Dark Web and how it is being used not only for sharing information about domestic violence, but about child pornography. The police are always, unfortunately, a step behind, although recently they have had some successes alongside their colleagues in the NCA and internationally.

I think that there has been something like a 60% increase in child pornography, online in particular, and, across my area, more and more children are going onto the child protection register in relation to a number of concerns. I think that it is right and proper that we try to get help to the children who need it and are at risk and that the onus is put on the offender. The sooner that people get the message that their sentencing outcome will depend on their cooperation with the investigators, the better. That is a message that we need to give out, not only to support those families who are tormented daily but those —.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will, yes.

Mr Frew: The Member raises a very important point. I think that it was Sinéad who said earlier that it is not only the disclosure, it is the timing of the disclosure to families. That very important point should be taken into consideration, too, because the perpetrator might disclose information just to get a more lenient sentence.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you for that intervention. That point was made very forcibly by the two families; they are very concerned that perpetrators might give up the location of the remains at their first parole hearing. The parole commissioners should make a graduated consideration at any hearing. There has to be a strong message from the Chamber this evening.

Mr Chambers: To lose a loved one to the heinous crime of murder is a huge burden for any family to bear, but not knowing the location of the remains is a pain that I find impossible to comprehend. It is a pain that many families have to live with.

I have known the Dorrian family for many years. They were a happy family unit living in the seaside village where my family has a retail business. I recall a lovely, well-mannered young child buying her 10p mixes on pocket money day. That pretty little girl was Lisa Dorrian. Lisa had her life in front of her. She would go on to have dreams and aspirations and a determination to succeed in life. Fast forward to a dark day in February 2005. Twenty-five-

year-old Lisa was attending a party in a caravan at a park in Ballyhalbert. This was the last sighting of Lisa alive. Someone was responsible for her death, and some people were responsible for disappearing her remains. The people who carried this out were people whom Lisa may have considered to be her friends.

Despite the best endeavours of the PSNI, no one has been charged with her killing, and no information that would help to return Lisa's remains to her family has been forthcoming. I know that her family appreciate the sterling efforts and the resources that the PSNI has committed to trying to find Lisa.

I watched the devastating effect that all this had on her loving family: her mum, her dad, her sisters and the extended family circle. They supported each other and, to this day, they continue to do so. Lisa's mum, Pat, never recovered from the tragic loss of her daughter and died of a broken heart without being able to lay her daughter to rest. Pat was another victim of this crime.

I do not believe that the Dorrian family care whether someone gets 10 years or 20 years in prison, if anyone is ever convicted of this cruel, heartless murder. Their only prayer is that they can finally give Lisa a Christian burial and know that she can then rest in peace. I do not know how anyone involved in this crime can sleep easy in their bed. Maybe they will wake up one morning and do the right thing. Unless they do, the demons summoned by what they did will haunt them to their grave.

I know the Murray family only through the media and having recently been at a meeting with them. They have seen the killer of their loved one convicted and sentenced but still crave the return of Charlotte's remains. Charlotte had a twin sister, Denise. I have twin daughters and twin granddaughters. You have to live with twins even to start to appreciate the bond that they enjoy. I know that the loss of her sister will be especially and deeply felt by Denise.

These families want just one outcome: it is not revenge; it is the return of their loved one's remains. The implementation of Helen's law would offer them hope of such a conclusion. Without this law, their hope will continue to be hollow. Helen's law may not provide what they seek, but it will concentrate the minds of those convicted of a killing where there is no body. I cannot support the Alliance Party's amendment because I do not believe that it will help families like the Murrays, the Dorrians and others find the closure that they seek.

Mrs Armstrong raised issues with the motion, but there will be future opportunities to fine tune any legislation that eventually comes to the House. I find it disappointing that the House does not feel able to rally around the motion in unity.

6.00 pm

Ms Bradshaw: I support the amendment. The motion clearly has considerable merit, and I commend its proposers. This is a very important topic. We cannot fail to be touched by the anguish felt by the families of Lisa Dorrian and Charlotte Murray. We are also filled with admiration for the families' campaigns in their and others' memory.

No one should be in any doubt that we are all fully in favour of a process that requires cooperation in locating

victims' remains to be considered as a fundamental part of parole, and work is ongoing to strengthen that. To be clear, therefore, our amendment is designed to strengthen the motion by outlining the steps necessary to achieve a legally watertight route to ensuring cooperation in finding remains and identifying victims that forms a statutory part of the parole process and, thus, maximising the chance of locating the remains or at least knowing what happened to them.

To rob someone of their life and then to rob their loved ones even of the knowledge of their remains is despicable beyond words. That is why we welcome the Bill passing through the UK Parliament known as Helen's law and the support for it expressed by the Chamber today. We want similar steps to be taken here in Northern Ireland, but we feel that it is essential to outline how those steps will be taken. We also recognise that we must move carefully but quickly. As Paul Frew referred to, we have seen too many other instances of trauma being exacerbated by political inaction in this House. This must not become another.

The amendment is also important because it emphasises that we already have the benefit of seeing the route forward adopted in England so as to ensure that it is legally watertight. A lot of work went into Helen's law. It needs to be emphasised that what is required is cooperation in locating remains or identification before release. However, that is not quite what the motion goes on to say. It does not reflect exactly what Helen's law delivers. To try to do something that is, in effect, what Helen's law delivers, as implied by the final part of the motion, would inevitably mean greater complexity and more time taken up. That is in no one's interest. Again, that is why the amendment is important: to make what we are pursuing legally watertight and deliverable as quickly as possible.

We need to be clear that any Charlotte's law would deliver the same as Helen's law, namely that, quite correctly, the parole board would give significant weight to non-disclosure. We also need to be very aware, given that we do not know when a similar case might occur, that even a swift legislative intervention to deliver a Charlotte's law would be unlikely to fit into the legislative programme during the current mandate. This means that years could pass with no change. That is not something that the Minister, my party colleagues nor I are prepared to wait for. Again, that is why the amendment is important.

We will consider all means of ensuring that the parole board gives significant weight to non-disclosure so that the family's objectives can be met. If we can get there by any means in the next few months rather than the next few years, that is what we will do. With that in mind, it is highly unfortunate that the COVID situation has impeded a formal meeting between the Justice Minister and the families. I am assured that one will take place urgently as soon as it is feasible. That will be the best way for the families to outline just how important their campaign for a sense of truth and justice is, and for the Minister to outline the many steps that she has already taken towards achieving this and ensuring that disclosure forms a part not just of parole but of enhancing the prospect of finding out what happened to their loved ones.

Having a debate such as this helps the process of detailed consideration of the most appropriate and efficient way towards meeting the interests of families who have suffered such appalling grief and trauma. The motion

is a useful step as it prioritises the issue and helps to clarify many of the issues around it. We hope that the amendment, which enhances the motion, will make it legally secure. We want support to be given to the Minister today so that she can move as quickly as possible on this issue. We would like unanimous support for our amendment.

Miss Woods: I welcome the opportunity to speak to this very important issue. Many Members have spoken about the horrendous pain and anguish suffered by the families of Lisa Dorrian, Charlotte Murray and others who have been denied the right and dignity of being able to lay their loved ones' remains to rest. I send my heartfelt thoughts and sympathies to those families and express support for the continuing campaigns for justice and reform of the law to put specific parole guidance relating to non-disclosure on a statutory footing.

As has been said, Lisa Dorrian, a young woman from Bangor, in my constituency, went missing in 2005 and her body has never been recovered. The PSNI has arrested 10 people but no one has been charged in relation to her disappearance because her remains have not been recovered and evidence is limited. According to media reports, the police have pursued more than 3,500 lines of inquiry and conducted roughly 400 land, air and sea searches. Throughout all of that, her family have continued to suffer and bear the burden of the severe emotional strain of not knowing what happened to her. On the 15th anniversary of Lisa's disappearance, the PSNI stated clearly that it has always believed that a small number of people hold the key to finding out what happened, and I urge any of them to come forward to the PSNI.

Charlotte Murray's family has also suffered terribly since her disappearance in 2012. Last year, after a jury convicted the man who murdered her, police drained a local quarry to search for her body but nothing was found. In his sentencing remarks, Judge Stephen Fowler QC recognised the devastating impact that not being able to lay Charlotte to rest had on her family and noted that the non-disclosure of the location of her remains has caused, and will continue to cause, the family considerable pain, distress and hurt. Judge Fowler also stated that he regarded non-disclosure as the most serious aggravating feature of the case.

Therefore, there is a clear need to reflect that in law, and I welcome the Minister's comments, not just on the introduction of a Bill that is equivalent to Helen's law in England and Wales but her thoughts on how the sentencing review will address the small number of cases in which non-disclosure is an issue. I pay tribute to Charlotte's family for their campaign for the introduction in Northern Ireland of legislation equivalent to Helen's law. I hope that the Minister will be able to bring forward changes that reassure and support the family of Lisa Dorrian in their continuing battle for justice.

The Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill, otherwise known as Helen's law, in England and Wales places a legal duty on the Parole Board to consider non-disclosure of the location of a victim's body when considering release. It will also apply to offenders who have been convicted of taking indecent images of children and refuse to reveal the identity of the victims. Parole Board guidance states that offenders who withhold information can be denied parole if they are deemed to still

pose a risk to the public, but guidance is guidance; Helen's law makes it a legal requirement for the Parole Board to consider the withholding of information when making a decision on early release.

Human rights legislation protects against indefinite detention and the sentence handed down in a court continues to apply, so the proposed new law in England and Wales strikes a balance between further protecting the public and guarding against disrupting the independence of the judiciary. I put it to my Justice Committee colleagues: why can we not take on this work? Perhaps the Chair of the Justice Committee can address that in his remarks, which will be coming later on.

We must, as an Assembly, do all that we can to improve confidence in the criminal justice system, and legislating for that change will provide a more consistent approach for victims and families. For Lisa and Charlotte, their families and many others, that is the very least that we can do.

Mr Speaker: I call Gerry Carroll. The Member has about three minutes.

Mr Carroll: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will begin by expressing my deepest sympathies to the families who are living without the knowledge of the location of their loved ones' bodies, such as the families of Lisa Dorrian and Charlotte Murray. Those people are stripped of the ability to bury their dead and must face unimaginable anguish from knowing that there is a person who holds that information but will not offer it up. That places a block on their ability to come to terms with the untimely passing of their loved one, and it is right that we acknowledge their reality today, as all Members who have spoken have.

Helen's law, which the motion refers to, would legally compel parole officers to consider the withholding of a victim's location when making a judgement about a prisoner's release. That was backed by Marie McCourt, who to this day does not know the location of her daughter Helen's body and has lived with that pain for many, many years. I am aware that — other Members mentioned it — parole officers already take that information into account. The amendment suggests that the Minister consider legislating for that when stakeholders have been engaged. We will support the amendment for those reasons.

We cannot, however, support the motion in its original form. The imposition of a sentence without the option of parole has been questioned in multiple courts internationally as being incompatible with human rights. A blanket ban on parole such as this potentially removes any semblance, in specific cases, of context or any attempt at rehabilitation. Undoubtedly, there are a lot of painful cases in relation to the issues that we are talking about today. We have heard many families speak bravely in the last number of weeks. However, to impose a law that denies parole for a subset of people, regardless of context or extenuating circumstances, is not the appropriate solution. It is easy to envisage how a law of that kind could have undesirable consequences.

It is not for us to determine — I am certainly not in a position to do so — whether any individual is ready for parole, but it is the Assembly's job, when laying down a law that will be used to determine parole, to guarantee that there is room for extenuating circumstances and context. At its foundation, law relating to the justice system should be rooted in rehabilitation. If adopted and were the Justice

Minister to adhere to it, the motion would run horse and cart through those important principles.

I am concerned generally that, when we have debates in the House about crime and criminal activity, the approach, primarily, seems to be to automatically push for harsher penalties and to ignore or curtail the benefits and possibilities of rehabilitation. That is a general point. I think that my time is up, so I will leave my comments there.

Mr Speaker: I call the Justice Minister, Naomi Long, who has 15 minutes to respond.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): First, I welcome the Assembly's interest in this important issue. I echo Members' words in paying tribute to the family of Charlotte Murray for their courage and commitment in pursuing their campaign for change. Charlotte was a loved daughter and sister who was cruelly taken away from her family. Her killer has been convicted but has refused to say how she died or where her body is. We all share the pain of Charlotte's family: the pain of not being able to lay her to rest, of not having somewhere to mark her life and her death, and of not having the opportunity to lay flowers or to feel close to her. That adds terribly to their anguish and suffering, and I know that from speaking with them briefly last week.

I also pay tribute to the family of Lisa Dorrian. For over 15 years and despite numerous searches, they have suffered the anguish and despair of not knowing what happened to Lisa or where her body is. Bravely, they are supporting Charlotte's family in its campaign. I take this opportunity to call again on those who could help to bring an end to their anguish to do so now and without further delay. We must not forget, as we discuss the motion, that these tragic losses are a personal tragedy for them and will affect their lives forever.

The Bill that is the subject of the motion and which is before Parliament makes changes to prisoner release provisions in England and Wales. It places a statutory obligation on the Parole Board in England and Wales to consider non-disclosure of information on where or how an offender disposed of the victim's remains or about the identity of children in indecent images as part of its assessment of whether such an offender should be released on licence. Those release provisions will apply to those who have been convicted of murder or manslaughter, those serving a life sentence or an extended determinate sentence, and where the board believes that a prisoner seeking parole has information about those matters. The board must also take into account what, in its view, the reasons for the non-disclosure are. For example, it must weigh up whether, due to the passage of years or illness during their time in prison, the prisoner is uncertain of the details or whether they are making a deliberate decision not to disclose that information. It is then for the Parole Board to decide what bearing that has on the risk that the prisoner poses and whether that risk can be managed in the community. It does not mean and is not "no disclosure, no parole", something that Members have repeatedly suggested throughout the debate.

6.15 pm

Under Parole Board guidance, those matters are already taken into account as part of the board's risk assessment of a prisoner's suitability for release. The main effect of the

Bill, therefore, is to place existing Parole Board guidance on a statutory footing. It does not place any obligation on the board to withhold release where the prisoner withholds information. The assessment of future risk is the determining factor in release decisions for the Parole Board, as it is for the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland. Article 46 and schedule 4 to the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 set out the powers of the Parole Commissioners. That legislation confirms that the Parole Commissioners must be satisfied that:

"it is no longer necessary for the protection of the public from serious harm"

to detain an individual in prison, to reach a decision that a prisoner should be released on licence.

I should clarify that the Parole Commissioners are involved in release decisions where an offender has been sentenced to a life sentence or to an indeterminate or extended custodial sentence. Those public protection sentences were introduced in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008. It is important to note that offenders who are convicted for taking or making indecent photographs of children under the Protection of Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 will have Parole Commissioner involvement in their release decisions only where they have been assessed as dangerous and have been sentenced to one of those public protection sentences. Those sentences were also introduced in the 2008 Order in order to replace the earlier arrangements where prisoners were released on remission at the halfway point of their sentence with no ongoing responsibilities for supervision.

The Parole Commissioners have no role in the release of prisoners who are serving normal determinate sentences, which consist of a custodial period and a period that is spent on licence. The length of both periods is set by the court at the time of sentencing. For those sentences, the commissioners become involved only in the rerelease of offenders who have been recalled to custody for the breach of licence conditions.

Before making a release decision, the commissioners assess all information relating to the offence for which the prisoner was sentenced and all information relating to the offender during his or her time in prison, including any progress toward rehabilitation and their acceptance of guilt. I understand that there have been no cases as yet where the Parole Commissioners have had to consider the non-disclosure of victims' remains or the identity of children in indecent photographs as part of the parole process, but if such a case arose, it would be an important factor in the consideration of release. It would be for the parole panel to decide what bearing non-disclosure and the reasons for it had on the risk that the prisoner poses and whether that risk can be safely managed in the community. A lack of acceptance of guilt, non-disclosure of the location of remains or non-disclosure of the identity of children in indecent photographs could be considered an indication that the prisoner has not addressed their offending behaviour and that it shows a lack of insight, remorse or empathy, and it could lead to a conclusion that the prisoner still poses too high a level of risk to be released.

The Parole Commissioners' Rules (Northern Ireland) 2009 underpin the parole review process. They provide

significant discretion to the commissioners to direct information from any party to inform the parole review and consider applications from any person to be a witness in the parole review process. The commissioners are not constrained in what they can consider in their assessment of risk, including the views of victims and their family. Currently, victims who register with any of the three victim information schemes, which are the prisoner release victim information scheme, the mentally disordered offenders victim information scheme and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland victim information scheme, are notified of parole reviews and can apply through my Department to the commissioners to be considered as an interested party to those proceedings. Where that is approved and agreed, victims and their family may provide written or oral statements on the impact of the offence and, if applicable, provide views on the potential release and licence conditions of the offender.

As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, it is my intention to look in the autumn at the potential of having a victims of crime commissioner, which I am minded to introduce. I see one of those roles as increasing the uptake of those existing rights because there is currently very low engagement with families beyond the point of sentencing, and why that is the case needs to be looked at carefully. Victims who are registered with the schemes are also notified of parole review decisions, but that is currently limited solely to whether the decision is to release the prisoner on licence or for them to remain in custody.

I think that we can do more in recognition of the importance to victims and their families of the parole process and its outcome. Where offenders are released, I appreciate that victims and their families can feel powerless and frustrated when they do not know the factors underpinning such a release decision.

This autumn, I will table an amendment to the Parole Commissioners' Rules (Northern Ireland) 2009 to provide that registered victims, instead of receiving notification solely of the outcome, will be notified of the factors that have been relied upon to inform the Parole Commissioners' decisions. That will be an automatic right for registered victims, regardless of whether or not they have submitted a statement to the parole review. It will also provide a platform for legal challenge if victims or their families consider that the decision was unreasonable, unfair or unlawful.

That is an important change, that, if accepted by the Assembly, will significantly enhance the transparency of the parole review process. However, and most importantly in my mind, I hope that it will help victims and the families feel that their role in the process is fully recognised and acknowledged.

I well appreciate that the pain and anguish felt does not end when an offender is sentenced. Those offences have changed their lives irrevocably and have changed their future. What must it be like to have a dearly loved member of your family murdered, but never know how they died or where their body is? To wonder, but never know, whether your child had been abused. Those thoughts haunt victims and families daily.

I realise that to be told that the offender will be released into the community must be distressing for victims of all serious offences involving life sentences or public

protection sentences. The least that victims deserve is to be told the rationale for those decisions. I believe that this will be a positive step that will help victims have confidence in the parole process and the decisions of the commissioners, who I know are very aware of the weight of their responsibilities.

However, I appreciate that such a change does not address the specific concerns of the families of Charlotte Murray or Lisa Dorrian, or Members who have spoken so passionately on this matter in the Chamber today. I appreciate, having listened very carefully to all the contributions today, that some Members believe that a refusal to disclose information should mean that parole is automatically denied, or that Helen's law will make that the case in England and Wales. That is incorrect. While I can understand such views, it is important that the discretion of the independent Parole Commissioners is maintained. They already have the onerous task, when considering such cases, of weighing the account to be taken of non-disclosure and any reasons for it, in consideration of release.

Ms Dillon: Thank you, Minister, for taking the intervention. In relation to Helen's law and Mr Beattie's suggestion that there could be an LCM, earlier we discussed in the Chamber that it is much better for us to make our own legislation, and that is not to take away from the work that has been done. In relation to the Domestic Abuse Bill, we have looked at Scotland and the Westminster Bill, and we do consider them, but it is important that we make our own legislation here in the Assembly.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her intervention. I will come to that specific point.

It is not an easy task, and I am very conscious that, should release be conditional on disclosure, it is possible that with the passage of time such disclosure may be highly fallible and inconclusive.

It could also potentially have the unintended consequence of encouraging disclosure of inaccurate information in order to become eligible for consideration. It should be remembered that some offenders may be particularly manipulative and wish to inflict more pain on the families, and that should not be forgotten.

Incorrect information would be particularly harmful in the case of the identity of victims in cases of indecent images of children. In a case such as that of Vanessa George, to which another Member referred, it is also possible that a prisoner either may not have or be sure of the identities of the children, and could incorrectly name children who are not those children who were in the images, and that could cause additional anguish to parents and children alike.

Punishment is one of the purposes of sentencing and it is for the independent judiciary to determine the appropriate sentence. The parole process, however, is not designed to be punitive but is about managing risk. The issue of non-disclosure is already considered by the judge in determining the appropriate tariff or sentence. For example, in Charlotte's case, that was considered to be the most serious aggravating factor when the sentence was determined, as Members have reflected. That is directly accounted for in the calculation of sentence, or in the case of life or indeterminate sentences, in calculation of the tariff.

Where a sentence is imposed that requires release decisions to be made by the Parole Commissioners, that forms part of the sentence. That aspect is made clear to the offender at the time of sentencing. It is at the point of sentence that punishment is applied. We have a long legal tradition that the latter parole stage is focused on assessing the risk to the public in any release. It would be a significant departure from that tradition to use non-disclosure for punitive reasons.

As I have said, the legislative test for the Parole Commissioners is that it is no longer necessary, in order to protect the public from serious harm, for the prisoner to remain in custody. The Parole Commissioners' role is to implement the release provisions of the sentence and to decide release on the basis of risk. To do otherwise would be a fundamental change to the basis on which release decisions are made and could have unintended consequences.

The motion calls for the introduction of legislation similar to the Bill in England and Wales. As I have already highlighted, the Bill does not, as some people seem to think, equal "no disclosure, no release"; it simply puts current parole review processes on a statutory footing. So, it will be considered but it is not determinative.

It is also important to note that what is legislated for in England and Wales is not necessarily appropriate for Northern Ireland. Before considering any change along such lines in Northern Ireland, I want to give very careful consideration to the need for change, whether change is appropriate and how that can be best tailored to ensure that it is right for Northern Ireland. Our sentencing structures and the structure of our parole commission are quite distinct and different from those in England and Wales and an LCM would not be appropriate in that case.

I would caution Members today, of all days, to be wary of the allure of speedy changes to the law. The potential for unintended consequences as well as intended ones is significant and far-reaching. It is right that we consider very carefully any proposed change in the law before embarking on that process. That is why I have already asked officials to initiate a focused engagement with relevant key stakeholders, including but not limited to members of Charlotte and Lisa's families — with whom I will also have a further meeting soon — the Parole Commissioners, the Probation Board and the Prison Service.

I also want to give careful consideration to the points that have been raised by Members today and to review the debates in England and Wales on Helen's law. That will enable me to determine how we address families and Members' concerns in the most effective and appropriate way possible in Northern Ireland. I intend that that exercise should be completed in the shortest possible period of time and I am glad to say that that work has already begun. It is being carried out alongside the work that is currently being undertaken to complete the sentencing review recognising, of course, that the role of the Parole Commissioners sits apart from the sentencing process.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mrs Long: I will advise Members and Charlotte and Lisa's families of my conclusions on a way forward later this year.

Mr Speaker: I call John Blair to make his winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member has five minutes.

Mr Blair: First, I want to echo the sentiments of other Members in applauding Charlotte Murray's family for their courage and commitment in pursuing their campaign and to see change. Charlotte was a loved daughter and sister, who was callously taken from her family — a family who have endured unimaginable suffering, the pain of not being able to lay their sister to rest and of not having a place to mark a daughter's life and death. For most of us that pain is, of course, inconceivable.

I would also like to pay tribute to the family of Lisa Dorrian who, through their own grief, have bravely supported Charlotte's family in their campaign. For over 15 years, Lisa's family have suffered the anguish and despair of not knowing what happened to Lisa and have never been able to lay her to rest. As we move to vote on the motion and the amendment, we should consider that those malicious acts are a personal tragedy for the families and friends of Charlotte and Lisa and that those tragic losses will, of course, affect their lives forever.

As I wind up the debate, I want to re-emphasise the comments that my colleagues Kellie Armstrong and Paula Bradshaw made earlier when they reflected that there is not sufficient recognition of the importance to victims and their families of the parole process and its outcomes. In situations where offenders are released, victims and their families can, understandably, feel powerless and frustrated when they do not know the factors that underpin a decision. However, having listened very carefully to all of the contributions to the debate, I appreciate that some Members believe that a refusal to disclose information should mean that parole is automatically denied.

While I can understand such views, it is important that the discretion of the independent Parole Commissioners is maintained. They have the onerous task, when considering such cases, of weighing the account to be taken of non-disclosure and any reasons for that in consideration for release. That is not an easy task, and I am conscious that should disclosure be conditional on release, it is possible that with the passage of time such disclosure might be highly fallible and inconclusive.

Time, however, passes, and there might be uncertainty about identities and locations. Those are practical and legislative challenges and are real, but they are matters that can be addressed in the sentencing review process initiated by the Minister, which is under way.

6.30 pm

Time permitting, I will reflect, as best I can, on Members' contributions. I do not think that I will have time to do so individually, but I will try to reflect on contributions in a cross-party way.

Alex Easton, who opened the debate on the motion, stressed the non-political background of the motion and set out the background to Helen's law. He also spoke eloquently of the grief and trauma for families. Kellie Armstrong, who proposed the amendment, pointed out that she believed the motion went beyond Westminster legislation and cautioned on the potential disparity between the sentence that is handed down and that which is served. Linda Dillon spoke in support of the amendment. She said that it could be the beginning of a process to deal

properly with these crimes. Sinéad Bradley, for the SDLP, spoke in support of the motion and of the unimaginable pain for families. She then turned to whether or not disclosure is deliberate. Doug Beattie spoke of the existing role of the parole board. He also spoke of the uncertainty for a family in not knowing when a killer will get parole. Rachel Woods spoke on the detail of the sentencing review and said that she would like to see some information on that. She also referred to her hope for change. Gerry Carroll referred, to quite some extent, to the current parole process. We heard from the Minister, who spoke of the Bills in question, the detail of current processes and, of course, the time frames involved in those.

Before I close, I again express my sympathy for the families of Charlotte and Lisa, given the pain and anguish that they have suffered. I urge that we follow the processes already in place to achieve a good outcome, and I encourage Members to support the amendment.

Mr Givan: I thank all the Members who have taken part in the debate this afternoon. The breadth of contributions from all parties across the House is a demonstration of how the issue, which we all care passionately about, touches on all our constituents. I do not, for one moment, call into question the sincerity of anybody's motives in what they have said, and nor should anybody call into question our motives. Some Members talked about politicking, and I do not think that that is appropriate. I would not say that about those who have tabled the amendment, even though I disagree with it.

I pay tribute to my colleague Alex Easton for moving the motion. He has spoken to me extensively about the issue and has pursued it for a long time. He has engaged with the First Minister, who supports these endeavours, and with the families on it. I pay tribute to Alex for the work that he has done on this.

I thank the Dorrian and Murray families for the way in which they have given voice to the issue. We can often debate points in a legalistic way, but, when families speak, they do so powerfully. That often resonates with the public in a way in which politicians' words are often unable to do. I pay tribute to the families.

Alan Chambers brought the personal connection to Members very well when he spoke about Lisa, as a little child, coming into the shop to buy a 10p mix-up. That brought home to Members the real personal aspect of what we are talking about and the absolute tragedy for the family, who still have not been able to get justice in any shape or form. I again join Members in calling for those with information to come forward so that the families can get some justice.

Some Members spoke about the coercive nature of the perpetrators and the continued desire to inflict pain on the families. Dolores Kelly, Sinéad Bradley and Paul Frew mentioned those different aspects, as did other Members. How true that is. How appalling it is not only to carry out a murder or to engage in the sexual abuse of children that paedophiles engage in but to then withhold information that could lead to the identification of remains or to the victims. That speaks to the kind of evil that exists among the people who carry out such crimes. That is why we need to have a system in place that can address that and undermine the power that those perpetrators seek to inflict.

I am concerned when I hear Members speak about the rights of the perpetrator in that context and about human rights compliance in what we seek to do: that does a disservice to those who believe in true human rights whenever it is used in that way. I disagree with the arguments that were being put forward around the concerns that Members articulated. Kellie Armstrong made reference to not being human rights-compliant, outlined reasons why we should not support the motion and spoke of concerns about accidental indefinite detention, which, of course, Sinéad Bradley addressed when she spoke about the deliberate withholding of the information and the safeguards that would be there to address those things.

Kellie Armstrong went on to say that politicians should not be able to interfere in sentencing. My, my: "politicians should not be allowed to interfere in sentencing". The judiciary sets the sentence on the basis of a sentencing framework that politicians set. I do not believe for one moment that we should be involved in saying that "X deserves this sentence", but we set the framework that the judiciary operates in. It is important that politicians engage in the issue and do not avoid their responsibility to others. She made reference to the Minister's consultation; that is good. She made reference to the review of the sentencing framework; again, that is good. We would like to see it. It was commissioned back in 2016, and we still have not seen progress on that coming forward.

The motion sends out a clear message and signal that we want action. We want to see the Minister of Justice lead on that. That will not absolve the Justice Committee of stepping up in the absence of the Justice Minister stepping up. We will have a Miscellaneous Provisions Bill, hopefully, in due course, and that will give an opportunity for not just this issue but other issues that Members have raised in the House to be taken forward. However, it should not be for Back-Benchers on a Committee to lead on this; the Justice Minister needs to lead on this. That is why the motion calls on the Justice Minister to lead on it.

I was concerned when Kellie Armstrong again made reference to how this will just be a non-binding motion, if it is passed. Members should not lightly dismiss a motion passed by the Assembly, because it mandates and calls for action by those who are named in it. This motion calls on the Minister to take action. I am confident that Alliance's amendment will not be successful. Therefore, I hope that the attitude that was displayed by Ms Armstrong is not one that is taken into account by the Minister and that we will see actions brought forward.

The Minister mentioned in response that the sentence takes this into account as an aggravating factor. I remind Members that the murderer of Charlotte Murray got 16 years. That was all: 16 years.

Mrs Long: Will the Member take a correction?

Mr Givan: Yes.

Mrs Long: He got a life sentence and a tariff of 16 years. There is a distinct difference. The tariff is the first point in the sentence where a person can apply for parole. The sentence is life, and it is life, because, even when he is released, he will continue to be a life sentence prisoner.

Mr Givan: He got 16 years to serve in prison.

Mrs Long: Minimum.

Mr Givan: Minimum. That is the point that we are making: 16 years to serve in prison and then the conditions for release. We are talking about those conditions for release. He should not be released if there is not disclosure. The Minister's response to this gives me further concern that she is not listening to what Members say. This is why the motion needs to be passed.

Mrs Long: Mr Speaker, if I may?

Mr Givan: Is it a point of order?

Mrs Long: It is a point of order.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member take his seat. Minister, are you making a point of order?

Mrs Long: It is a point of order, Mr Speaker.

I am listening carefully to what Members say, and I do not appreciate my position being misrepresented by others in the Chamber. It is unhelpful to do so. I am conveying accurately how sentencing works. That is my duty, as the Minister of Justice. That has to be clarified for the record.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for putting it on the record, but that point was made in your remarks earlier. Continue, Mr Givan.

Mr Givan: The Minister should not be so defensive when Members raise issues. We do it in a spirit of wanting to see progress made. The Minister does not always need to be so defensive when it comes to Members raising such points.

We need to send out a clear message. I am on the side of the victims, as, I believe, all Members are. We need a clear process to get victims the justice that they need. We need to send a clear message to murderers and paedophiles that, if you do not disclose information, you should not be released.

I want to go further than Helen's law. The motion makes that clear; it says it for Members to see. To use the precise wording, we want to ensure that:

"prisoners convicted of murder and child sex offences are not eligible for release until they disclose the location of their victims' remains or ... identity"

That is what I want. Be in no doubt about what the motion states.

Let me say something on the amendment that the Alliance Party has moved. The families can say this better than I can, and maybe the Alliance Party will reflect on it. I appeal to them to listen to the families, not to press their amendment and try to come with the majority of Members. The families said in respect of the amendment — we received it through correspondence — that:

"This amendment has caused considerable upset for both families. We would strongly urge you to reject this proposed amendment as the content weakens the original motion and diminishes the level of justice that we seek."

I appeal to Members to reject the amendment and support the motion.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Mr Speaker: I think the noes have it and the amendment falls, but, given issues around social distancing, I remind Members that it is not always a simple matter to declare a vote passed or failed. I will put the Question again, and, if there are any dissensions, the House will divide.

Question put a second time and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the ongoing pain and trauma experienced by families in Northern Ireland whose loved ones have been murdered and who continue to have no knowledge of the whereabouts of their remains; welcomes the progression in the UK Houses of Parliament of the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill, otherwise known as Helen's law, placing a statutory obligation on the Parole Board to take into account an offender's non-disclosure of such information when making a decision about their release from prison; notes that these obligations apply to prisoners serving a sentence for murder or manslaughter, or for taking or making an indecent photograph of a child; and calls on the Minister of Justice to introduce urgently equivalent legislation in Northern Ireland to ensure that prisoners convicted of murder and child sex offences are not eligible for release until they disclose the location of their victims' remains or the identity of their victims.

Adjourned at 6.42 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 29 September 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

COVID-19: Restrictions on the Hospitality Industry

Mr Speaker: Members, I have received notice from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement. I welcome the fact that we have the First Minister here this morning to address the Assembly. It follows on from yesterday when we had two Ministers in to brief the Assembly. These are very important contributions to the Assembly, and I want to extend our appreciation to the members of the Executive for doing so.

Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in the light of the social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question about it, has been relaxed. Members still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. However, they can 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 a question. It is not an opportunity for debate per se, and long introductions should be avoided.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you, Mr Speaker. In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on recent steps taken by the Executive to try to prevent the spread of the coronavirus epidemic. These decisions have been taken against the following backdrop. Since the beginning of July, there has been a gradual, but sustained, rise in the number of positive COVID-19 tests. On Saturday, the Department of Health confirmed that a further 319 people in Northern Ireland had tested positive for coronavirus. Since then, a further 407 people have tested positive. Saturday was the highest daily tally reported since the pandemic began and brings the total number of confirmed cases reported to 10,949. In the past seven days alone, 1,513 cases have been diagnosed. Unfortunately, one death has been reported, bringing the death toll to 578. There are 51 COVID-19 patients in hospitals across Northern Ireland, with six in intensive care, and there are outbreaks of the virus in 28 care homes.

Evidence from the test, trace, protect programme tells us that a significant number of the COVID-19 cases are being acquired through household contacts and informal interactions in the community. Wherever people meet each other, there is a risk of transmission. That is why the Executive agreed that restrictions in domestic settings should be introduced to reduce community transmission

occurring through indoor social gatherings in households. Initially, this was applied on a postcode basis but now applies to all areas of Northern Ireland. These restrictions are a necessary and proportionate approach to address the increasing number of COVID cases that we have witnessed since early July, and which have accelerated over the past weeks.

Positive case numbers are of serious concern to the Executive, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA). The numbers themselves, and the rate at which cases are doubling, should be a concern to all parts of our society, including the business sector and citizens. If allowed to continue, this will inevitably lead to an increase in hospital admissions and deaths, and that is something that we must try to minimise.

Building on the measures already in place, the Executive agreed last Thursday that a closing time of 11.00 pm should be applied to the hospitality sector. That will come into effect from midnight on Wednesday 30 September 2020 and apply to those parts of the hospitality sector that are subject to current regulations, including pubs, bars, restaurants and cafes as well as hotel and guesthouse bars. No alcohol or food will be served after 10.30 pm, and all customers must leave by 11.00 pm. In practice, that brings the normal closing times forward by half an hour, and there will be no late licences.

The intention behind the earlier closing time is that socialising later in the evening is considered to increase the risk of virus spreading because people adhere to the rules less strictly after consuming alcohol and in venues where they are used to mixing freely. There can be no exceptions to this, so weddings and other important social events will also be required to comply. From Thursday 24 September, all business that serve food or drink in England, Scotland and Wales have been required to shut at 10.00 pm under new measures that were introduced to control the rising rate of coronavirus, and that includes pubs, restaurants, cafes, social clubs, casinos and bingo halls.

The 10.00 pm closing time that had initially been imposed in certain areas of England became a nationwide restriction, and that is because of the need to ask people to further limit their social interactions. Sales of alcohol from off-licences and supermarkets in Northern Ireland already stop at 11.00 pm. That will help to ensure a consistent approach in border areas.

Some will make the point that pubs and bars closing at 11.00 pm will drive people to house parties, and we recognise that risk. However, house parties and gatherings in our homes are illegal. The restrictions already in place

ban people from more than one household to be in a private dwelling or more than six people from no more than two households to be in a private garden.

The totality of the arrangements will be subject to enforcement. We do not want to go there. We would prefer that everyone works with us to have an impact on the spread of the virus. However, enforcement has a role, and we are working closely with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and local government to understand the issues from their perspective and the importance of community responses. Junior Ministers are working closely with the police and local government, and we will be looking at the fine levels that we have here as a matter of priority.

It is essential that business owners and members of the public adhere to these restrictions, which will help to reduce the length of time that the restrictions will need to be retained. We want to avoid more stringent measures, but we have been clear from the outset of the pandemic that we will put restrictions in place if we have to. We will do so carefully and with great thought to the social and economic impacts, but if we need to act, we will.

As always, we must continue to be extremely careful in all aspects of our lives, particularly for the medically vulnerable members of our community. We appreciate that this is a difficult time for everyone, and yet more restrictions are not what any of us wants. It is very important to say that, Mr Speaker. We cannot emphasise enough that the regulations are intended to protect you, to protect other people, to reduce the spread of infection and to bring the epidemic to an end as soon as possible. We assure the House that the restrictions will be kept under constant review and measures will be removed if possible, but, equally, they may be added to if necessary. We can all help to curb the spread of the virus by maintaining social distancing; maintaining good hand and respiratory hygiene; wearing face coverings; self-isolating immediately if we experience any symptoms, including a new persistent cough, a fever or a loss or change of smell or taste; seeking a test if we experience any of those symptoms; downloading the StopCOVID NI app; and complying with the restrictions in place. Our message is simple: if each and every one of us does our bit, we will help to bring the epidemic to an end sooner rather than later, and, by doing that, save lives.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I welcome today's statement from the Executive Office and the First Minister and the confirmation that it provides. Furthermore, I welcome the ability for us to be representatives here and ask questions and seek clarity on the decisions that have been taken. It is fairly obvious that we are facing a crisis in the pandemic; around 15% or 20% of the cases have been recorded in the past week alone. The First Minister detailed the new rules and regulations, which are welcome, in terms of assistance to try to curb that. Will she outline any discussions or considerations that there have been to giving help to businesses in the hospitality industry that are close to the edge as it is and may be pushed over it by the restrictions? I wonder where our Economy Minister is. She needs to deliver us not a reaction to what has happened but a concrete plan to help businesses and support those who will lose their livelihood and everything that goes with it because of the restrictions.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Committee Chair for his question. The Executive have been engaging quite closely with the hospitality sector, as he would expect us to do. We have taken a partnership approach with that sector throughout the pandemic, given the fact that it was told to close very early in the pandemic and has been one of the last sectors to reopen. We recognise all the pressures and strains that that puts on those businesses. It was because of our consciousness of the pressures that the hospitality sector is under, and also observing the 10.00 pm curfew in other parts of the United Kingdom and the way in which that has worked, that we decided to have an 11.00 pm curfew. We hope that that will allow businesses, particularly restaurants and hotels, to have a second sitting; one of the concerns that was raised with us around the 10.00 pm curfew was that it would not allow for two sittings in a restaurant. We hope that that now can happen. We have been listening very carefully to the hospitality sector.

The recovery piece is something that the Executive, as a whole, have been working on. We have agreed a tentative recovery framework and have been working with the Department of Finance. The Chair will know that, just last week, the Minister of Finance came forward with more allocations in respect of trying to fight COVID. There is still some money left in that budget to deal with some of the known unknowns that are yet to come before us. We know that things are going to get difficult for a lot of businesses, so we need to be prepared to try to work with those sectors when those difficulties come about.

I regret that we have had to make this announcement today. I think that we all do. However, we are trying to take an appropriate, proportionate reaction to what you pointed out: the rising number of cases right across Northern Ireland. When you put it in that very stark way — over 1,500 cases have been diagnosed in the past week — that is quite a significant rise, so it is important that we act in a proportionate way, listen to the voice of businesses and also put lives to the forefront of our mind. As well as saving lives, we should think about livelihoods. I take very much what the Chair has said. We will continue to work with him and his colleagues in the Committee as we step through what will be a very difficult time.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for coming to the House today with the statement. We have heard much about people complying and some not complying, but what is very much in people's minds is this: who will enforce the regulations?

Mrs Foster: Of course, right from the beginning of the pandemic, we have said to the people of Northern Ireland that we want to work in partnership with them. We want to work in partnership with the various sectors, such as the hospitality sector; citizens generally; and sports, for example. We are working very hard with those organisations. We have listened today to the threats to some of the Irish league teams because of the fact that they have no income coming in.

I noticed yesterday that the GAA was making a similar point about its funding.

10.45 am

We have been working very much in partnership with people, but, as I said in my statement, enforcement has a role to play. The junior Ministers are leading

the enforcement group from the Executive. They are working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and local government to make sure that we have, first, the appropriate powers in place. Do we need to revisit the level of fines that we have in place? I would much prefer people to work with us, comply with the restrictions and listen to the guidance, because it is for their own good. It is for individuals' own good. It is therefore important to take some responsibility for our actions.

You are right: enforcement plays a role in all of this, and we will have to deal with people who persistently offend through the appropriate authority, be that local government, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) or the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as ucht an ráitis. I thank the First Minister for the statement this morning. Does she believe that the British Government's job support scheme is adequate to support workers who have to leave work to self-isolate?

Mrs Foster: There are two things there. First, for those who have to self-isolate, the Government have announced a package of £500 so that they can remain at home. To make sure that people in Northern Ireland can avail themselves of that, we still have to get more clarity on whether it is a Barnett consequential or is demand-led.

The Member asked about the job support scheme. Obviously, we knew that the furlough scheme was coming to an end. The Executive as a whole were concerned that that would lead to a cliff edge for those who were on the furlough scheme. The job support scheme is not as generous as the furlough scheme — I think that everyone has accepted that — but it at least allows us to move forward without there being a complete cliff edge. I am concerned for the industries affected. I met representatives from the events industry and outgoing travel industry representatives recently. Such companies basically have no work at this moment in time, so, under the job support scheme, they do not really have viable jobs for people to go to. I am therefore concerned about some of those industries, and we will need to see what we can do to help them. The job support scheme is not as good as the furlough scheme, but it is certainly better than having nothing at all with which to support industries in Northern Ireland.

Mr Stewart: I thank the First Minister for her statement. As you rightly said, the United Kingdom has a 10 o'clock curfew and the Republic of Ireland has 11.30 pm, while we have arrived at 10.30 pm and out for 11.00 pm. Can you give some clarity about how that time has come about? You can understand that the public and the sector will look at it thinking that times are almost being plucked out of the air. Why is there that variety across these islands, and why did the Executive decide on 10.30 pm for 11.00 pm?

Mrs Foster: It certainly was not plucked from the air. We looked at the experience in England, Wales and Scotland. I am sure that you will have noticed some of the television coverage over the weekend about people leaving bars at 10 o'clock, the crowds in the streets and what have you. We wanted to make sure that we aligned with off-licences and supermarkets, which stop selling alcohol at 11 o'clock. The allegation was made that people will leave the pub and go to a house party. They cannot go to a supermarket or off-licence to buy alcohol after, because the sale of

alcohol stops at 11 o'clock. We felt that that was a good reason to close at 11 o'clock. We were conscious of the fact that the Republic of Ireland's curfew is at 11.30 pm, but we made an assessment that people would not travel across the border for such a short time.

That is why we chose the 11 o'clock curfew. There was a reasoned discussion amongst colleagues. The decision has the support of the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. We took a holistic approach and considered behaviour patterns: what will happen when people leave public houses, hotels, restaurants and what have you? That is why we arrived at the decision of 11 o'clock.

Mr Muir: I thank the First Minister for coming to the House. It is a useful opportunity to get an update on the situation and to seek clarity. On 17 September, the Executive Office issued a statement in which it stated that beer bikes would not be permitted to operate, but, thus far, there has been no legislation or action to make that a reality. Will the First Minister outline what actions are being taken to make that a reality?

Mrs Foster: Beer bikes are a particular problem. We are considering how to deal with that problem, and officials will engage with the operators of those bikes. The Member is right to point out that beer bikes still need to be dealt with, and I hope that we can deal with them sooner rather than later. They are an anomaly that needs to be dealt with.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for her statement. Why did the Executive not match the 10.00 pm closure time in England? How are Ministers trying to get the message through to young people and students?

Mrs Foster: I have responded to why we decided on 11.00 pm: it was because we considered all the different issues, such as ensuring that hospitality could have a second sitting if people were having food and making sure that we closed at the same time as off-licences and supermarkets for the sale of alcohol. We also took it into account that there was a small differential between us and the Republic of Ireland, which means that people should not travel across the border because of that differential, and, of course, we considered the experience of the 10.00 pm curfew on the mainland.

The Member is right to point out the need for us to have good messaging for young people. I addressed that yesterday at Question Time, and I believe that we need to reach them effectively. The Executive information service is engaging on new digital messaging and using radio stations such as Cool FM that the younger generation listens to — although I am partial to a bit of Cool FM myself, Mr Speaker. It is important that we use the appropriate platforms to reach our younger people, and we are certainly looking at that.

Ms Anderson: Minister, as we all know, Ireland is a single epidemiological unit, particularly for animal health, but I want to talk about human health. The Public Health Agency (PHA) has said that there is a cross-border protocol in place for tracking. As you know, the rate in Derry, Strabane and Donegal is alarming, yet doctors have said that they do not know about the protocol and are not using it. Are the Executive planning to increase tracking and tracing, particularly for cross-border workers who cross the border every day?

Mrs Foster: I heard the GP from, I think, Lifford make that very point about the tracking and tracing. I was a little surprised at that, because I had understood that our StopCOVID NI app was interoperable with the app in the Republic of Ireland. We will certainly look at that. I know that the Chief Medical Officer here and his counterpart in Dublin have been working closely on those issues. The deputy First Minister and I took calls from the Taoiseach last Thursday during which he alerted us to the issue in Donegal, and, after those calls, we immediately spoke to the Chief Medical Officer to make sure that there was that ongoing contact. We, of course, realise that a lot of people work in either jurisdiction. It is important that they can continue that work, but, at the same time, we must be able to track where the virus is and try to break transmission. That is the most important thing.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister for her statement to the House. It is concerning that we have had over 1,500 new cases in the past week, so I welcome the clarification on closing times for establishments that serve alcohol and the inclusion of weddings. Minister, would it not be more appropriate for the Minister of Justice to take part in the enforcement group that has been set up?

Mrs Foster: Obviously, it would be inappropriate for me to answer on behalf of the Justice Minister, but I think that she took the view that the enforcement issues were wider than her ministerial portfolio, so she did not feel that it was appropriate to chair the group.

It is important that we have the group in place; we cannot allow things to be held back. The junior Ministers chair the enforcement group. It is highly important that that work continues. As the Member knows, I said yesterday that the Executive Office is meeting the universities today, and the enforcement group will continue to meet local government, our colleagues in the Police Service of Northern Ireland and all the other agencies that have a role in enforcement. Part of it is enforcement, but, again, I stress that it is important that everybody has responsibility for their own actions. Compliance is important as we run through what will be a difficult time for us all over the next couple of weeks and months.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. The issue of closing time for the hospitality industry is a clear example of the need for us to work on an all-Ireland basis in our response to COVID-19, particularly for people living in border areas. What engagement have the Executive had on that basis?

Mrs Foster: We were conscious of the 11.30 pm curfew in the Republic of Ireland and of what was happening on the UK mainland, but we have always said that we will take the decisions that are appropriate to Northern Ireland. That is what we have done in this regard. We have recognised that it might be a slightly later time in the Republic of Ireland, but, frankly, the time for travel is so short that we do not think that there is an incentive to go across the border to continue to seek alcohol. We have taken into consideration the different jurisdictions and the different experiences, while listening to our hospitality industry. I know that some in the hospitality industry will be disappointed by the announcement — we have heard from some this morning — but we are doing this to keep them open generally and to allow people to continue, albeit in a more limited way; I accept that. However, we hope that, if we take action now, we can stop the spread and the transmission and then,

hopefully, deal with the issues in a progressive way so that we can return to normality more quickly. If we do not intervene now, things will get worse and we will have to take more punitive measures, and none of us wants to do that. We want to stop the transmission of the virus. That is the focus.

Mr Catney: I thank the First Minister for briefing the House. Responsible publicans are prepared to follow the regulations to the letter in order to keep people safe. The industry is one of our most highly regulated, and those involved know how best they can look after people in their premises. We have missed a trick. Given that last orders will be at 10.30 pm and off-sales will be open until 11.00 pm, does the First Minister have any concerns that people leaving the bars at 10.30 pm will be able to go to an off-sales, tank up with alcohol and head off to house parties? That is a major concern. It is a flaw in the regulations. The off-sales should have been closed before the bars, at 10.30 pm.

Mrs Foster: I recognise the Member's expertise in the area, but we believe that, if last orders are at 10.30 pm, you have drinking-up time until 11.00 pm. The off-licences close at 11.00 pm. If people decide to leave the bars at 10.00 pm and go to the off-licences, there is little that we can do about that. We are trying to have uniformity across the piece, and we think that having off-licences, supermarkets and all of the hospitality industry close at the same time gives uniformity and provides clarity. We have heard from people that, when there are different times, they are confused. We took time over this, and we took criticism for not announcing it last Thursday, but we were determined to get the regulations right and to make sure that we had clarity. That is why I wanted to come to the House today. I wanted to explain the thinking behind the regulations and to say that I believe that this is the best way forward. It is a reasoned way forward, and that is what we have put before the House.

Mr Beattie: Minister, it is not easy. They are difficult decisions, and I commend all those who are making the difficult decisions and showing that moral courage. I urge people to lean into those decisions.

I agree that enforcement is not always the answer, but it is an important tool. I am disheartened to see that only one Minister, the Minister of Health, actually attends that working group. Obviously, it is chaired by the junior Ministers. I want to follow up on a question from Pam Cameron. Was the Minister of Justice invited, by the Ministers or in writing, to chair the strategic working group on enforcement?

11.00 am

Mrs Foster: As I have said, I cannot answer for the Minister of Justice, and I am sure that you will raise this with the Minister directly. My understanding is that she did not want to chair the meeting because she felt that the remit of the enforcement group was wider than her departmental responsibilities. I think that that is patently the case. However, I say to all Ministers in the Executive that that enforcement group is open to anyone who wishes to come along. I pay tribute to the junior Ministers for the work that they have been doing, along with the Health Minister, on that committee. It is not an easy subject. We certainly do not want to be in a position to have to enforce any of this. We would much prefer it if people complied

and worked with us, but, unfortunately, we have to have enforcement. Originally we were looking at some of the issues around the Holylands, but now that group is wider. As I say, any Minister can attend that meeting. We will ensure that the note is sent out from our office to any Minister who wants to attend, so that they can attend if desired.

Mr K Buchanan: First Minister, there is a narrative and a following out there that this crisis does not exist, that it is a bad flu, and that it is all a Government hoax. What would you say to those individuals or those groups of people?

Mrs Foster: If they do not want to believe me, they can look at the data. As the Chair of the Committee rightly pointed out, the data is very clear. We have 1,513 new cases in the last seven days. At the height of the pandemic, we did not have that number of cases. It is not a hoax; it is a reality. If you speak to anyone who has been unfortunate enough to contract COVID-19, they will tell you very clearly that it is not a hoax. It is something that does not just impact on them during the time when they are feeling unwell; it stays with them for a considerable length of time as well. It has an impact on all your organs and is a very painful experience to go through — a very scary experience as well — sometimes, sadly, leading to death. So I say to people, if you do not individually feel that you are at risk, think of your family, think of your friends and think of those around you who are vulnerable. Please do not be selfish. Please do the right thing and abide by the guidance and the regulations that are there.

Mr Gildernew: In relation to the point that Keith Buchanan has just raised, I note that today, as a civilisation, we have crossed the horrendous threshold of 1 million deaths around the world from COVID-19, so it is clearly not false.

I acknowledge that, by and large, the majority of people are abiding by the restrictions, which are onerous in themselves at times, and we should recognise that. However, it is clear that the test-and-trace system, which is a key component of fighting this virus, has been under pressure in recent times and may well come under additional pressure as we move into the winter months. Are there any plans to develop and build bespoke additional capacity in the system here to deal with the pressures that we are now facing?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question, and he is right. I looked at some of the headlines in the newspapers this morning. It is a sobering thought that 1 million people have lost their lives to this pandemic across the world.

We have been very pleased with the way in which the test-and-trace system has been working, particularly in our care homes. We have been able to identify the fact that there has been COVID-19 in some of our care homes solely through our testing regime. I think that 24 out of the 28 care homes that were confirmed to have COVID in them were identified by the testing programme. That is progress. Obviously, we wish that it was not in any care homes. If the Health Minister comes to the Executive and says that he needs further resources for his testing programme, I think that he will have a very empathetic ear from the Executive. We will want to ensure that he has the resources available to him. If he does that, we will certainly listen to what he has to say.

Mr Dickson: I thank the First Minister for coming to the House and making a statement. I welcome it. I invite

the First Minister to also tell us what holistic approach the Executive are taking to deal with the totality of the pandemic in Northern Ireland. After all, the economy has been trashed. Public expenditure is out of control. Businesses are being destroyed. Thousands of patients have been denied life-saving treatment. Disabled people are unsupported. Children's futures have been mortgaged and damaged to the hilt. People's mental health and welfare is at risk. Dealing with one sector is important, but what is your holistic approach?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that very good question. In our recovery framework, we have been considering how we listen to, sometimes, contrary narratives. We have been looking at economic well-being and societal well-being, including mental health and how we can ensure that we take action around that. That is one of the reasons why it was important to have Professor Siobhan O'Neill put into office as the mental health champion. We have been looking at non-COVID health. The Member will know that Minister of Health has brought forward his cancer plan. There are many other conditions for which he needs to bring forward plans. I am sure that we are all getting correspondence in relation to that.

Importantly, we are looking at things from a family point of view. I know that there has been a lot of discussion about the family unit. Of course, in Northern Ireland, family is very important. The voice of the family needs to be there as well. There is no doubt that that will become a louder voice as we move towards some of the very significant times when family would be together, such as Christmas. Therefore, we have a big job of work to do in relation to how we bring together all those different strands, because it is highly important that, whilst, of course, we have to deal with the COVID piece, there are so many other pieces that we must deal with as well.

Dr Archibald: I thank the First Minister for her statement. This week, we have seen a number of cases amongst the student population. Students' representatives have been saying that there is a lack of clarity about messaging and guidance that is specific to them. Does the First Minister think that enough is being done to support students, including those who are self-isolating? Do the regulations permit students to travel home at weekends and at the end of term?

Mrs Foster: I will start with the latter end of that question. Yes: at present, students can go home at the weekends and at the end of term. That is something that we will look at continually. It goes back to the issue of families being able to come together. We know that, uniquely, young people go home at the weekends for various reasons, perhaps for a job or just to see their family. We ask them to exercise caution. Of course, if they have any symptoms, they should self-isolate and seek a test.

We are working with the universities. Officials are having a meeting with the universities today. That is important. I have to say that some of the scenes from other universities on the mainland have been quite distressing. This morning, I was reading about someone who is vegan being offered Mars bars in support, so a lot of support needs to be put into that. Obviously, we are in touch with Queen's University about those who have been diagnosed as COVID-positive and those who are self-isolating in order to ensure that the appropriate support is in place. Therefore, it is an ongoing issue. It is a developing issue,

unfortunately. We will continue to work with the universities on it.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the First Minister for her statement. The economy is not in recovery. It is hanging on. It is on life support at present. While the announcement is necessary, it is not welcome for obvious reasons. What further restrictions are being considered by the Executive if that intervention does not work?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. Indeed, we are considering a menu of interventions and it is important that we do. The positive thing to say to the Member is that, as we understand it from our Chief Scientific Adviser, the household restrictions that we put in place in Ballymena had the impact of reversing the trend in that area. In Belfast, the household restrictions slowed the transmission of the virus.

It is important that we continue to monitor the restrictions that we put in place to see what impact that they are having before we bring forward other restrictions. We are very conscious of the fact that the Act under which this is all happening, and on which we have received quite a lot of correspondence recently, says that we need to be proportionate and that it needs to be necessary. That is something that we always keep to the forefront of our mind. We do not want to bring forward restrictions on hospitality; we are only doing so because we believe that it is necessary, but we do believe that it is proportionate.

Mr Chambers: First Minister, I welcome your clear message to the public this morning, especially to the small minority of people who seem to think that this is some sort of a hoax to rob them of their civil liberties. Earlier, my colleague Doug Beattie asked whether the Executive had invited the Justice Minister to chair the new enforcement body. You referred him to ask that question directly to the Justice Minister. Can I respectfully ask, First Minister, whether, at any point, you asked the Justice Minister to chair this body?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I do not want to get into the details of Executive meetings. It would be invidious and wrong to do that. I think that it is a common cause. The Justice Minister has made comments relating to the enforcement group. It is my understanding that the reason why she felt that she did not want to chair that group was because the remit was wider than the Justice portfolio.

It is incredibly important that all five Executive parties work together at this critical time. Whilst we all may have different views on different things, it is important that we listen to the data. Today, I have tried to outline the data to the House as to why we are taking these decisions. I have tried to explain the rationale behind the 11.00 pm curfew as opposed to another time. I hope that Members appreciate that this is not something that we arrive at very quickly. We take considerable time to deal with these issues and we will continue to work together. That is a critical point in an effort to do what is right for all the citizens of Northern Ireland.

Mr Chambers: Thank you.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the First Minister for the statement. As a former member of the Policing Board, you will be aware that policing and enforcement is a huge problem. You are essentially applying policing enforcement to a health crisis.

Enforcement is also the responsibility of other agencies. What discussions have you had with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (Solace), for example? To pick up on Mr Chambers' point, it is my understanding that the junior Ministers have a very clear remit to ensure that there is dialogue and early engagement with the police and others on how restrictions might well be enforced.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. The junior Ministers do take on that role, not just engaging with the police but with Solace. They have very much been part of those conversations and with other agencies that may have a role in enforcement.

I could not be clearer: we do not want to have to enforce the rules. We would much prefer that people complied with them and worked with us. There needs to be, dare I say it, that backstop to deal with these issues, and the police have been very good in working with the Executive Office. If there is an issue, they come and talk to us and we try to sort the issue out. As Mr Beattie said earlier, none of this is perfect. We are trying to deal with an emerging situation. When you look at the numbers of people who are testing positive for COVID, it is an appropriate and necessary step that we are taking.

11.15 am

Mr McGlone: I thank the First Minister for her responses up until now. On the specific question of enforcement, it came to my attention, particularly over the weekend, that the police were saying that there is a grey area, certainly on whether they are to be the lead agency on enforcement, and senior officials in local government are saying precisely the same thing to me. They say that they are waiting for clarification from the Executive on that. Perhaps the First Minister could give us some insight on where we are and when the situation is likely to be clarified. There is a wider issue around the messaging and the clarity of message emanating from the COVID regulations.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I hope that my coming here today and setting out the rationale behind the decision to close hospitality premises at 11.00 pm explains what we are trying to do in that respect. I hope also that the fact that the whole hospitality industry will be closed by 11.00 pm gives clarity to the Police Service of Northern Ireland and makes enforcement easier for it. There are no exceptions, no late licences, and therefore the police will know that no hospitality premises should be open after 11.00 pm.

When we had the differentiation between wet bars and those selling food, it was difficult to enforce. I accept that. I know that there were some very good businesses that were faithful in keeping their doors closed, as wet bars only, but there were some that were not. They were gaming the regulations, and we were aware of that. I think that it is important that the whole sector is now open, although we have put the whole sector under a curfew of 11.00 pm. I hope that that will give some clarity.

It will not be welcomed by the industry. I recognise that. However, we are doing it to try to ensure that we stop the spread of coronavirus and break the transmission levels as well.

Miss Woods: I thank the First Minister and the junior Minister for coming to the House today. First, will the First Minister confirm an important detail in relation to an earlier

question, that last orders will have to be before 10.30 pm, given that she stated that customers must be off the premises by 11.00 pm, to facilitate drinking-up time?

Secondly, has there been any assessment by the Executive or by her ministerial colleague in Economy of what potential reduced staff hours might mean in terms of redundancies?

Mrs Foster: Hotels and bars will stop serving alcohol at 10.30 pm. So, last orders will be at 10.30 pm, just to be clear, and people will be off the premises by 11.00 pm. That is what the restrictions will say.

As for the assessment of redundancies and what have you, I think that we were very clear about the importance of allowing for a second sitting in restaurants and pubs that sell food. That was an effort to try to make sure that they are viable. Without that, it would have been challenging for some restaurants. As I said, this will not be welcome, but it will be better than closing at 10.00 pm and having some of the associated difficulties with that.

Mr Allister: I note that there are two versions of the statement. Perhaps the First Minister will explain that. Has what has been announced this morning yet been reduced to regulations? Are the regulations to deal with this now published, and do those regulations extend to conduct within the public houses, namely social distancing between different households? If they do, who is going to enforce that? Is that burden going to be on the publican or on someone else? If people are going to retire from the pub to a local house, how is enforcement to be undertaken?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I apologise if a draft statement was put out. The statement that I delivered is the statement, just to be clear.

In terms of enforcement, the regulations will be laid tomorrow, and they will come into force tomorrow evening at midnight. So, tomorrow is the last day, if you like, of the old regime, and the regulations will come into force on Thursday.

As for individuals in public houses, the responsibility lies with the individuals. I am not making any apologies for the fact that it will be difficult to enforce that. I accept that, but we are saying to people, "If you want to work with us and break the transmission of the virus, the best way to do that is to limit your social contact with other individuals from different households inside." That is why we are having that limit.

People can meet others outside in the open air, where it is well-ventilated and they are socially distancing. There is no science to this, Mr Allister. I know that you will want to interrogate the regulations and that is absolutely the right thing for the House to do. However, I ask the Member to bear with us in the enforcement of these regulations because we are trying to do something that we have never done, which is to stop the transmission of the virus, and we are asking people to work with us in that respect.

Mr Carroll: Sick pay is paltry for many hospitality workers, and it is likely that many will be financially forced to make decisions that may not be best for their health and the health of the community. What extra provision does the First Minister or the Executive have to develop a COVID sick-pay scheme for low-paid hospitality workers?

Mrs Foster: I hear the Member's question, and I am sure that the Economy Minister will be looking carefully at the industry to see if interventions are needed to help. I accept what the Member says about such workers being in low-paid jobs and, sometimes, on zero-hours contracts. There is a need to be aware of all that, and I am sure that the Economy Minister, or, indeed, the Communities Minister, will bring forward any support proposals if that is deemed necessary.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I thank the Minister and those Members who contributed on this important issue.

Mr Beattie: On a point of order. Last Monday, I had a question for urgent oral answer for the Justice Minister about the Holylands. My subsequent question was about the COVID enforcement group.

The Minister's answer was:

"With respect to the Member, the composition of the working group was not a matter for the Department of Justice; it was a matter for the Department of Health and the Executive Office, so I suggest that perhaps that is something that he should take up with them."
— [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 30, p285, col 1].

I now believe that the Minister was asked to chair that working group. Therefore, the candour and openness of the Minister in answering my question were not in keeping with the seven principles of public life, as in openness.

Could I ask the Speaker to please rule on whether the Minister should be invited back to the Assembly and reflect on that answer?

Mr Speaker: Given that you gave me no notice of that point of order, I will consider and reflect on that and come back to you.

I ask Members to take their ease while we prepare for the next item of business.

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

Executive Committee Business

The Northern Ireland Screen Commission (Funding) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

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

That the Northern Ireland Screen Commission (Funding) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): 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.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity. The Northern Ireland Screen Commission (Funding) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 will provide my Department with the vires to provide Northern Ireland Screen with grant-in-aid payments to allow it to continue to promote commercial activity and employment.

Northern Ireland Screen is the lead agency for the development of the screen industries in Northern Ireland. It has also had considerable success in attracting major screen projects to Northern Ireland, for example, the world-acclaimed HBO 'Game of Thrones' series, which is estimated to have brought in excess of £250 million into the local economy, employed over 1,000 local people in each of the eight series and has elevated the profile of the Northern Ireland screen industry internationally.

Production in Northern Ireland has now resumed for large-scale projects, and a new film, 'The Northman' is currently being filmed at Torr Head on the Antrim coast. High-profile projects like that will continue to support the growth of our international stature as a production location, along with the growth of our indigenous sector, as Northern Ireland Screen support ensures that local personnel are involved in international productions.

In economic terms, during the period of Northern Ireland Screen's previous strategy, it is estimated that for every £1 spent on developing the screen sector in Northern Ireland, there was £2.70 returned to the Northern Ireland economy.

The legislation brought forward to the Assembly today is required following the transfer of Northern Ireland Screen to my Department from the then Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in May 2016 as part of the restructuring of Departments. Prior to that transfer, Northern Ireland Screen received the majority of its programme funding from Invest NI via a letter of offer. When Northern Ireland Screen became an arm's-length body of my Department, it was agreed that funding would continue to operate as previously until the existing Invest NI four-year letter of offer expired in March 2018.

Since 1 April 2018, the Department has funded Northern Ireland Screen directly rather than through Invest NI. The Department has received approval from the Department of Finance to rely upon the authority of the Budget Act on the clear understanding that appropriate legislation would be taken forward to remedy the situation once the Executive returned. There is therefore now a requirement to regularise the legislative basis on which my Department

funds Northern Ireland Screen. The statutory rule being brought forward will not impact on the policy or strategic direction of Northern Ireland Screen or the amount of funding that it receives; rather it is simply a regularisation of the legislative basis on which the Department funds Northern Ireland Screen. Therefore, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I rise to speak briefly as Chair of the Economy Committee to support the motion on behalf of the Committee. As the Minister has indicated, the NI Screen Commission (Funding) Order (NI) 2020 will provide the Department with powers to fund NI Screen Commission, that is, NI Screen, and will regularise how the Department for the Economy makes grant-in-aid payments to NI Screen to allow it to increase commercial activity or employment in relation to the screen industries here.

The Committee considered the SL1 for the NI Screen Commission (Funding) Order (NI) 2020 in April, and members were content with the policy direction. The Committee agreed the statutory rule at its meeting on 9 September 2020 subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. The rule came into operation in May 2020. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has no issue with the rule, and I support the motion to affirm on the Committee's behalf.

I will now speak very briefly as Sinn Féin's economy spokesperson. We recognise the role and success and commend the success of the screen industries and our creative industries. Like others, they have experienced difficulties due to COVID-19. The Minister has outlined the important contribution of both the screen industries and the wider creative sectors to our local economy and the skills base in respect of that locally. We want to see that continue to grow and, therefore, support the order to continue the grant-in-aid payment to develop commercial activity and job creation in the sector.

11.30 am

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the motion, which provides the Department with the powers to fund Northern Ireland Screen. As the Chair stated, at the Economy Committee, we agreed the statutory rule earlier this month. The DUP supports today's motion. While it may be purely an administrative change, it is important, as it gives the Economy Department a sound statutory footing to fund NI Screen.

Northern Ireland Screen is an important agency working to maximise the economic, cultural and educational value of the screen industries to the benefit of Northern Ireland. Its activities make a considerable contribution to growing a sustainable economy, creating opportunities to tackle disadvantage and building a strong and shared future. The Minister highlighted some of the major screen projects secured by NI Screen, including the 'Game of Thrones' series, which has brought millions of pounds to the local economy and employed hundreds of people across all the series. Importantly, it has boosted our tourism industry on a worldwide stage. We must continue to explore the sector and try to secure future projects.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for bringing the motion to the House. I support the motion.

As colleagues across the Chamber have noted, the screen industries make up a vital component of our economy. It was estimated to be worth over £270 million in 2018. I welcome the motion, as it will enable Northern Ireland Screen to continue to develop our film industry and to nurture local expertise. Its important work has already helped to establish the region as a screen industry hub globally, attracting big names, as was outlined, such as 'Games of Thrones'. That has generated valuable opportunities for local creatives in front of and behind the camera. No more exporting our creative talent for them never to return; we now import them. The legacy of the shows lives on in the tourism services and the hospitality industries. In my city of Derry, we have experienced a boost since the success of 'Derry Girls'.

The funding order will allow Northern Ireland Screen to build on its previous successes, creating new employment opportunities and supporting creatives in overcoming the COVID challenges. It is imperative that we support this vibrant showcase industry in Northern Ireland in order to survive the current crisis and to thrive thereafter. Anything else would put livelihoods, creative activity and innovation at risk.

Mr Catney: We have all seen the good work that Northern Ireland Screen has done over the past few years in promoting Northern Ireland. It brings investment and jobs to the region; in fact, it seems that I cannot watch a programme these days without recognising a building, street or a local hang-out. However, those are not the only things that Northern Ireland Screen does.

Northern Ireland Screen works to create opportunities for the widest possible range of people across the screen industries. It has an efficient education programme that works to make sure that we have future generations of skilled workers for the industry. It has an extensive trainee programme to give new opportunities and skills to young people who want to get involved in the industry. Importantly, it works in areas of deprivation to allow people from all backgrounds to become involved. Beyond that, Northern Ireland Screen fulfils an important cultural role in its work promoting the Irish language and Ulster-Scots arts sectors. The funds that it provides to those sectors allow them to grow and to be enjoyed for years to come. It is also important to realise that the creative industries supported go far beyond film and TV. There is support for creative activities and technical skills that are transferable to all arts and beyond.

I will go back to the matter at hand. It is great to see our area represented on the screen, and we all have fun trying to figure out where all the productions are located. However, we have to realise that each time we see Northern Ireland on the screen is a direct testimony to the foreign direct investment that Northern Ireland Screen has brought in. In this time of pandemic, when we are all concerned about investment in the region, Northern Ireland Screen continues to bring money, jobs and skills to Northern Ireland, and, for that, it is completely deserving of our support.

Mr O'Toole: It seems that my party is very fond of talking about this. We seem to be the only party that is interested in talking about the motion, but that is fine. It is important.

I welcome the fact that the funding order is before the Assembly. I will not go through all the productions. Others

have done it, and we all know how wonderful they are. The specific economic value of 'The Fall', 'Derry Girls' or whatever is not in doubt. Perhaps more important than or as important as the direct economic value has been the self-confidence that it has given to Northern Ireland in the post-Troubles era. For perhaps too long, too much of our economic policymaking has been about securing lower-value-added jobs announcements, and, while no one should be in any doubt or be sniffy about the importance of getting people into work, as, I am sure, the Minister is not, especially given the economic headwater that we are getting into, our creative industries stand out as a genuinely value-adding sector. However, we need to plan for the future, so that is what I want to talk about in brief today, and I will ask the Minister to reflect on it as she deals with the industry, going forward.

We have talked about 'Game of Thrones' tourism, which is wonderful, but it is in abeyance at the minute and we do not know when or if it will return to previous levels. There is a risk that we have almost become drunk on the success of 'Game of Thrones'. Wonderful though it is to see 'Game of Thrones' tourists at Tollymore, Strangford lough or the Dark Hedges in north Antrim, it is in abeyance at the minute, and 'Game of Thrones' tourism is not evidence of a thriving plan for our screen industry, going forward. We need to plan for the future.

The point that I make is that our screens industry — it is not just film and TV, as Pat Catney said; it includes a growing video-game production sector in Northern Ireland — is looking at the opportunities for the future, and the Department is supporting the industry in that. One of those areas is around virtual production and how film, TV and screens production in general adapts to the transformation that has already happened and will continue to happen in digital production. For example, lots of people in the sector are already reflecting on the fact that there is much more virtual production when it comes to big Hollywood films or big productions generally. That might mean that there is less need for some of the facilities that exist in Belfast at the minute. That does not mean that they will go into decline, but it means that they need to adjust their digital capabilities, including the skill set that we have in Northern Ireland and in Belfast in particular. What work is the Minister doing with, for example, the screen and media innovation labs and the Future Screens programme, which is funded by Northern Ireland Screen and, therefore, indirectly by her Department? That work is taking place with the universities here, and it is really important that we have an ongoing plan to ensure that we are at the cutting edge of things going forward and not, as it were, resting on our laurels.

On that note, it is worth raising an issue on which I have corresponded with her and that, I know, she cares about: I ask her to take up the cudgels again on BBC investment in Belfast. The BBC was due to invest nearly £80 million in inner South Belfast, in my constituency. Bluntly, it probably will not do that now. I have had correspondence from the outgoing director general and from the new director general, both of which suggest it will not happen. It is really important that the Minister and everyone here keeps up the pressure to ensure that we get the maximum investment in that, particularly to sustain digital skills. That was due to be a hub for digital skills in Belfast. We need that to continue.

Lastly, it is really important that we reflect on the work of Northern Ireland Screen. Northern Ireland Screen is a critical funder of film-making, TV production and games production in Northern Ireland. Many of the people whom it funds, encourages or gives seed, training and everything that is needed to are freelance creatives who have had an absolutely torrid few months. They have had — belatedly, it has to be said — an announcement from the Executive that funding that was made available via Barnett in July will finally be allocated. Can the Minister use her offices to put pressure on to ensure that that money is properly disbursed quickly and that people who work in our screen industries in Northern Ireland are able to access it in a way that works for them? For example, lots of them are self-employed. Some of them move from self-employed status to employed status as they go from one production to another. Sometimes, they are in Northern Ireland and are paying UK taxes; at other times, they travel abroad for a while. All of that means that there are complicated issues around how they fund themselves, so I ask her to engage with the Department for Communities on how that funding is got out. There are issues to address for the future, but, in general, I welcome the funding order, and I am glad that it is being made today.

Mr Allister: I too welcome the making of the order. I do that as the MLA who drew attention in the Budget debate to the fact that we had this anomalous situation where Northern Ireland Screen was not being properly funded on a statutory basis but in an obscure way through the black box system that operates under the Budget Act. Of course, it was being funded well in excess of the supposed limit on that mode of funding. Therefore, it is good that it is now being regularised and brought onto a proper statutory footing. I am still puzzled as to how it ever was in the position that it was and how, for so many years, under both Departments, it continued without the proper statutory basis yet continued to be funded. It is good that, at last, that has been regularised. It makes an important contribution to our economy. Indeed, there are many unseen support industries across Northern Ireland that feed into the product that is Northern Ireland Screen, and I am glad now that the funding is being put on a lawful and proper basis.

Mr Carroll: I think that excitement was the feeling that most of my constituents had yesterday when Mr Adrian Dunbar and his colleagues were filming in west Belfast, and that sort of captured the excitement that the film and creative industries can give the people at any time but especially in the middle of a health pandemic. Obviously, the Minister will be aware of the group of hundreds of independent actors and artists who gathered, I think, last Friday through the We Make Events NI group in a socially distanced way. It is important that we hear the voices of those who work in the sector.

As Members have said, NI Screen is an important project, and it supports important programmes such as the Irish Language Broadcast Fund (ILBF). Such programmes are important and essential in developing and nurturing talent, but, by their design, they are limited in being able to take in only a certain number of people and places. I think that there is a general concern that there may be an approach that focuses solely or primarily on developing big showcase programmes. Those are obviously welcome and enjoyable for people, but, as has been referred to, freelance actors and others working in the creative

industries generally may be forgotten about or cast aside. What assurances can the Minister give us with the order that it will not be the case that just the big organisations and the big projects will be supported? Finally, it is essential that we reclaim and keep to a basic principle that art should be for people's benefit and enjoyment and not be about maximising profit, be that locally or internationally.

Mrs Dodds: I thank colleagues across the House for their support in ensuring that Northern Ireland Screen is appropriately funded and that the anomaly that we have had in its funding will be no longer. That is an important basis for going forward, and I thank you for your support on that.

For a few seconds, I will answer some of the questions and issues that have been raised by the debate. I think that we are all supportive of the funding model and mechanism that we need to fund Northern Ireland Screen.

We are all also very supportive of the work that Northern Ireland Screen does, as our colleague Matthew O'Toole said, in giving confidence to Northern Ireland and bringing back that sense of being able to step out on the international stage and do things that gain international acclaim, win awards and are really important for Northern Ireland. That is important.

11.45 am

The Chair referenced some of the issues around Northern Ireland Screen, including skills issues. Skills are really important for the future of the industry in Northern Ireland. I was really encouraged by my visit to my local further education college. That new build, which is opening soon in Banbridge, means huge investment in the local economy. There, the Southern Regional College will invest in digital and media skills, and 300 young students from across that region of Northern Ireland will be upskilling in all these areas. That is important and exciting for Northern Ireland: not only are we looking at how we support core and traditional values and industries but we are reaching out to new industries and training young people to be part of them. Again, I stress the importance of video game and virtual production. Those are hugely important to Northern Ireland, and I look forward, as the Minister responsible for skills, to doing more work in that area.

All of us in the House have, I think, collectively, expressed our pride in what Northern Ireland Screen does and what it brings to Northern Ireland, but it is also important to remember that it is a huge contributor to the economy. That can continue, and it can increase its contribution. It is one of the areas that we need to focus on for the new economy and for Northern Ireland's next century. I thank colleagues across the House for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Northern Ireland Screen Commission (Funding) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

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

Fisheries Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

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

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Fisheries Bill, as introduced in the House of Lords on 29 January 2020, and consents to the Fisheries Bill being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament.

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

Mr Poots: This UK Government Bill contains UK-wide clauses, the majority of which relate to devolved matters. It also contains a small number of provisions that are specific to Northern Ireland. It is for this reason that I am seeking the Assembly's legislative consent to the Bill extending to Northern Ireland. However, before I get into the detail of these provisions, I would like to emphasise the importance of the Bill.

The Bill will ensure that a legal framework is in place so that the UK is able to operate as an independent coastal state under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982 after the UK has left the common fisheries policy at the end of the year. In addition and no less importantly, it will allow us to create common approaches to fisheries management within the rest of the UK. This can only be good for the future of sustainable fishing, an objective that I am sure that we can all support and which I will return to later. The Bill as amended at Committee Stage in the House of Commons contains provisions of interest to Northern Ireland on fisheries objectives, fisheries statements and fisheries management plans; access to UK waters; fishing boat licensing; fishing opportunities; grants and charges; financial assistance; and the powers to amend UK law related to fisheries and aquatic animal health.

I turn now to the detail of the Bill and specifically to those clauses that are UK-wide and touch on devolved matters. Clause 1 defines UK fisheries objectives and is one of the Bill's key elements. There are eight objectives.

A sustainability objective will ensure that fishing and aquaculture activities are environmentally sustainable in the long term and managed in a way that is consistent with the objectives of achieving economic, social and employment benefits.

A precautionary objective will apply a precautionary approach to fisheries management and ensure that marine stocks are maintained above levels that are capable of producing maximum sustainable yield.

An ecosystem objective will implement an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management. This will ensure that negative impacts of fishing activities on the ecosystem are minimised and also that incidental catches are minimised and, where possible, eliminated.

A scientific evidence objective will contribute to the collection of scientific data. It will also require the UK's fisheries administrations to work together, share data and make use of that data to inform our fisheries management policies.

A by-catch objective will seek to avoid or reduce catches of unwanted by-catch. It will also include undersized fish and the need to record and account for all catches so that they are not discarded at sea, but without incentivising the catching of undersized fish.

An equal access objective will ensure that the access of UK fishing boats to any area within British fishery limits is not affected by the fishing boat's home port or any other connection of the fishing boat or any of its owners to any place in the UK.

A national benefit objective will ensure that the activities of UK fishing boats bring social or economic benefits to the UK or part of the UK.

A climate change objective will seek to minimise the adverse effect of fishing and aquaculture activities on climate change and ensure that those activities adapt to climate change.

Before I leave these objectives, I would like to mention an amendment that was passed in the House of Lords but subsequently overturned by the UK Government in the House of Commons at Committee Stage. I mention it specifically because I know that it has been of interest to some Members and indeed others outside the House. This was the insertion of a new subsection into clause 1 so that the sustainability objective would become the primary fisheries objective. It would have required future policies to give priority to environmental sustainability over economic and social sustainability. In fact, it would have been prioritised over the other seven fisheries objectives. The UK Government's response was that there should be no hierarchy of objectives and that the place for applying these objectives to the policies in each jurisdiction should be the joint fisheries statement. That is a position that I support.

That takes me neatly on to clauses 2 and 3, which relate to the joint fisheries statement. Clause 2 places a duty on the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the devolved Administrations to set out their policies for achieving the fisheries objectives in clause 1 and how they intend to make use of fisheries management plans in order to achieve those objectives. It recognises that a joined-up approach is needed on the coordination of fisheries policies once the UK has left the common fisheries policy. The Bill as amended at Committee Stage in the House of Commons requires that the statement is published not later than two years from the date of Royal Assent. Clause 3 sets out the procedures that should follow in the preparation and publication of the statement and of any replacement of or amendment to it.

Clauses 6 to 11 relate to fisheries management plans. Clause 6 places a duty on the relevant fisheries authorities to prepare and publish the proposed fisheries management plans in the joint fisheries statement and sets out what should be specified in each plan, including whether there is sufficient scientific evidence to make an assessment of a stock's maximum sustainable yield.

Clause 7 sets out the requirements for preparing and publishing replacement plans or amendments to existing plans, while clause 8 sets out the procedure that should be followed. Clause 9 permits a fisheries authority to prepare and publish a fisheries management plan before a joint fisheries statement has been agreed and published. Clause 10 permits each fisheries authority to pursue the

policies outlined in the joint fisheries statement or fisheries management plans that are applicable to them. That is to provide for some flexibility in decision-making. Clause 11 places a requirement on the fisheries authorities to report on the effectiveness of the policies in the joint fisheries statement and the fisheries management plans and to lay those in the respective legislatures.

I move to clauses 12 and 13, which cover access to British fisheries by foreign fishing boats and the regulation of foreign fishing boats. Clause 12 sets out when foreign fishing boats may enter British fishery limits, when they must leave and the offence for failing to comply. Clause 13 introduces schedule 2, which contains amendments to subordinate legislation and ensures that foreign fishing vessels are subject to the same regulations as British fishing boats when fishing in UK waters.

Clauses 14 to 18 deal with the licensing of fishing boats. Clause 14 sets out the circumstances in which a licence is required for British fishing boats, subject to certain exemptions. That maintains the status quo and ensures that a licence will be effective throughout UK waters. The clause also provides the DEFRA Secretary of State with the power to amend the section by regulations but only with the consent of the devolved Administrations. That respects the devolution settlements.

Clause 15 provides a power for devolved Administrations and the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) to grant licences to British fishing boats. Clause 16 prohibits fishing by foreign fishing boats unless they have a licence issued by a fisheries administration. The clause reflects the fact that, once the UK has left the common fisheries policy, access for foreign vessels to fish in UK waters is subject to negotiations. Members will be aware that that issue is key to ongoing negotiations between the UK Government and the European Union.

Clause 17 provides a power for the devolved Administrations and the Marine Management Organisation to grant licences to foreign fishing boats but with respect only to the area of UK waters for which they have competence. For us, that means the Northern Ireland zone.

Clause 18 defines “sea fishing licence” and introduces schedule 3, which makes further provision about sea fishing licences.

Clauses 19 to 22 set out the penalties for offences in relation to access and licensing, the jurisdiction of a court to try offences, and consequential amendments. Included in that are the circumstances in which the officer of a body corporate as well as the body corporate may be found guilty of committing a relevant offence.

That takes me to clauses 25 and 26, which relate to fishing opportunities. Clause 25 sets out the criteria for the distribution of fishing opportunities, according to transparent and objective criteria, including those of an environmental, social and economic nature. Clause 26 places a duty on fisheries authorities to ensure that fishing opportunities are not exceeded.

Clauses 33 to 35 relate to grants and charges. Clause 33 introduces schedule 6, which confers power on the Northern Ireland Department to give financial assistance or to arrange for financial assistance to be given to any person for a range of specified purposes. It must be given

in accordance with a scheme established by regulations made by the Northern Ireland Department.

Clause 34 introduces schedule 7, which confers powers on the Northern Ireland Department, corresponding to those conferred on the Secretary of State by the clause. Those relate to the imposition of charges for carrying out specific marine functions. Members will wish to note that the regulation-making powers in schedules 6 and 7 would be subject to the Assembly’s affirmation resolution and negative resolution procedures respectively.

12.00 noon

Clause 35 amends the Fisheries Act 1981 in order to extend a requirement that the Sea Fish Industry Authority, which is perhaps better known as Seafish, must recover the full cost of any service that it provides to persons in other countries. That is a technical amendment that will enable Seafish to recover all its costs from persons in the EU regardless of what it charges those in the UK.

Clauses 36 to 41 relate to the power to make further provisions about fisheries, aquaculture, aquatic animal diseases and scope. Clause 42 introduces schedule 8, which provides the Northern Ireland Department with the power to make provisions about fisheries and aquaculture etc and aquatic animal diseases corresponding to those that are conferred on the Secretary of State by clauses 36 and 38. Those provisions relate to technical matters that are currently regulated by the EU under the common fisheries policy and will allow us to make changes to amend UK fisheries law.

Clause 44 introduces schedule 9, which contains amendments to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and in connection with prohibiting the killing, injuring or taking of seals. The current position in the UK is that permission can be granted, albeit under licence, to shoot seals in order to protect fisheries’ interests, particularly salmon farms. However, countries that wish to export fish and fish products to the United States of America from 1 January 2020 must have obtained what is known as a comparability finding. That means that their fisheries’ regimes and regulatory frameworks must comply with the United States’s Marine Mammal Protection Act, which gives a very high level of protection to marine mammals and includes a prohibition on international killing. This amendment will enable us to meet those requirements.

Clause 46 introduces schedule 11, which makes minor and consequential amendments to retained direct EU legislation. Clauses 47 to 51 make final provisions. Those provide for amendments to certain provisions of subordinate legislation to ensure that any such provisions can be further amended by subordinate legislation in the future provided that regulations that are made under the Bill make:

“consequential, supplementary, incidental, transitional, or saving”

provisions etc. They define commonly used terms in the Bill, set out the territorial extent of the Bill, explain when the Bill’s provisions will come into effect and provide the short title, which, when the Bill becomes an Act, will be the Fisheries Act 2020.

Finally, I will turn to the schedules that apply to Northern Ireland. Schedule 1 sets out the procedures that will

apply to the preparation, adoption and publication of the joint fisheries statement. Schedule 2 amends secondary legislation that will ensure that foreign fishing vessels that are licensed to fish in UK waters will be subject to the same requirements and restrictions as UK fishing vessels that are operating in those waters. Schedule 3 makes further provision in relation to sea fishing licences, and schedule 4 makes minor and consequential amendments to access to UK waters and licensing. Schedules 6 to 9 and schedule 11, which has been covered, also apply to Northern Ireland.

Before I finish, I will bring Members' attention to three amendments that will be tabled by the UK Government at Report Stage in the House of Commons. I am mentioning them here simply in the interests of transparency and completeness. The Bill as introduced amends the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 in order to provide powers for Scottish and Welsh Ministers to regulate fishing for marine conservation purposes in their respective offshore regions. First, the UK Government are being asked to table an amendment at Report Stage in the House of Commons that will provide DAERA with similar powers to regulate fishing in the Northern Ireland offshore region.

Secondly, schedule 2, to which I referred, includes amendments to subordinate legislation that was made to address local issues that, because of EU law, could be applied only to UK vessels. The UK Government have been asked to table an amendment to that schedule at Report Stage in the House of Commons in order to include six Northern Ireland statutory rules so that the restrictions and requirements that are provided by them will apply equally to all fishing vessels that are licensed to fish in the Northern Ireland zone.

Thirdly, a new provision should be tabled at Report Stage in the House of Commons to provide Scottish and Welsh Ministers and DAERA with a power to enter into arrangements with, for example, other devolved Administrations and their marine management organisations. That amendment would provide the legislative basis for putting in place those joint working arrangements.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): As we have heard from the Minister, this is a Westminster Bill that aims to provide for a new legal framework to replace the common fisheries policy (CFP). It will make provision for fisheries, aquaculture, marine conservation and the functions of the Marine Management Organisation, and in doing so will revoke the EU legislation that currently exists.

There are a number of clauses within the Bill that extend to this jurisdiction for which legislative consent is being sought and they have been outlined in the LCM. The Committee has reported on those and a copy of our report was provided by email to all MLAs on 7 July. A supplementary LCM has since been tabled to take account of further amendments that affect here. The Committee took evidence on that last week and I will refer to those amendments later.

I want to make it clear today that, as a Committee, we had a very short timeframe in which to consider the Bill. Not only was the Committee considering the Fisheries Bill, but it also had the Environment Bill and the Agriculture Bill, all within weeks of one another. That caused much concern

amongst Committee members. We were finishing our consideration of the evidence when the COVID-19 crisis hit in March and that also had an impact on our scrutiny. This type of rushed scrutiny is not how we like to do business.

The Committee wishes it to be clearly understood that due to the lack of information on the Fisheries Bill and the subsequent amendments, and the limited time that it has had to consider them, it has been unable to fully explore and understand the potential impacts and implications for this jurisdiction. Furthermore, the Committee's consideration of the amendments has been further compounded by the fact that it is being asked to do so in the context of the legal uncertainties around the Internal Market Bill and the withdrawal agreement.

Our fishing produce is world-renowned and much value is placed on our exported produce. Nevertheless, many will know that the fishing industry is a dangerous occupation and it is a living that is hard-earned. Therefore, we must not merely nod through legislation which could create further complexities for our fishing industry, including financial, technical and territorial problems. Many coastal families and communities have seen fishing handed down from generation to generation and have no desire to see further hardship or regulation for the sake of it. For that reason, and many others that I will outline shortly, the Committee decided not to take a position on the legislative consent motion.

I will now look briefly at how the Committee undertook its scrutiny of the Bill in the short time that it had to do so. We took oral and written evidence on one day only — 5 March 2020 — from a number of stakeholders. Ideally, we would have preferred to have heard from many more, but as I have already said, time was against us.

The Committee commissioned a research paper from the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) on the Fisheries Bill and received a written submission from Brexit and Environment, which is a network of impartial academic experts who analyse the implications of Brexit for government.

From the evidence gathered by the Committee and analysis of the Bill in the time that we had, the Committee identified a number of issues that I share with you today.

The first issue that I want to draw Members attention to is the hierarchy of fishing objectives that the Bill revolves around, which will lead to a joint fisheries statement underpinned by fish management plans. There are eight objectives and they are sustainability, precautionary, eco-system, scientific evidence, by-catch, equal access, national benefit and climate change.

Stakeholders expressed some concern around the definition of eco-system and stated that they would like to see the definition expanded to include the sustainability of the fleet and the communities that they support, in order to allow for a holistic approach. Others considered that they should be underpinned by a clear legal duty on relevant authorities to achieve them, alongside a level of consistency between the devolved Administrations to ensure that the objectives are achieved.

There were numerous issues identified in the RaISe briefing which the Committee considered in relation to the objectives, such as the role for Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) with regard to the scientific evidence

objectives etc. These are outlined on page 9 of the Committee report.

Although some of the stakeholders broadly welcomed the objectives and the joint fisheries statement and the fish management plans, we as a Committee felt that there is a distinct lack of clarity and detail around those particular clauses, making it very difficult to assess what the impact will be on the fishing industry. Again, the lack of time and resources afforded to the Committee has prevented the full and rigorous scrutiny that the Bill required.

Access and licensing is another feature of the Bill, which will revoke and replace all current powers for licensing authorities to license for fishing in British waters.

Throughout the Bill there are references to “foreign fishing vessels”, which some members of the Committee objected to when used in connection with vessels from the South of Ireland. Clarification was sought from the Department on the use of that terminology.

Officials advised the Committee that the term is a recognised one, which is used worldwide to define vessels that are not registered in the country that is being referred to. They further advised that the term is used 53 times in the Bill. For the purposes of the Committee report, it was agreed to replace the term “foreign fishing vessel” with “non-UK fishing vessels or boats”.

The Bill requires such non-UK vessels to have a UK-issued licence to fish in UK waters. That requirement will revoke the current arrangements, which automatically provide rights to such vessels. In addition, the Bill will revoke provisions in the Fishery Limits Act 1976 and will introduce a new requirement that non-UK vessels must be licensed by the Marine Management Organisation or by one of the fisheries administrations to fish in UK waters.

Clause 17 empowers the relevant fisheries authority to issue licences to non-UK vessels to fish inside their zone. Stakeholders raised the issue of such licensing and of potential governance gaps. Concern was expressed about the potential for a non-UK vessel to access Isle of Man waters post-Brexit. To do so would be entirely legal but the potential exists for illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and claims that fish that were caught in one area were caught elsewhere.

The Committee is concerned that uncertainty exists around moving from fishing waters of a European jurisdiction to Scotland, Wales, England or here, including the Isle of Man and the South of Ireland and further guidance on that aspect is required. Stakeholders also raised the issue of remote electronic monitoring (REM) as a fishing management tool. Further information on REM can be found in the Committee’s report at page 12. The Committee raised that matter with departmental officials.

The Department advised that it has a sea fisheries inspectorate which has an enforcement and control remit. However, that role will change on 31 December 2020 and the risks and resource requirement for that was being considered. That is another area that the Committee was unable to explore in any great detail with the Department or stakeholders. Questions remain over the resource implications for the sea fisheries inspectorate to enable it to ensure compliance with licensing requirements, as well as what its role and remit will be on 1 January 2021 and

how it will manage the requirements that are contained in the Fisheries Bill.

Members will be aware that fishing quotas have always been the subject of heated debate and have long been one of the main criticisms of the common fisheries policy. Clause 23 of the Bill provides that the Secretary of State will determine, in a calendar year, the fishing quota for the UK, which will take international obligations into account. The Bill states that the Secretary of State must consult with the four fisheries administrations.

The Committee was keen to explore with the Department if any assessment had been undertaken of the potential for an increase in fishing opportunities for our local fleet. Officials advised the Committee that an assessment of the benefits arising out of Brexit had been mapped. However, the main fishing opportunities for fleets here are mostly in the Irish Sea for prawns and no major change to quotas are anticipated.

Stakeholders advised the Committee that while they envisage that the current method of allocating quotas will be continued, they have concerns about the distribution of any additional quotas that will come their way following exit from the EU. They expressed concern that the fishing zone here is small and does not accurately reflect the fishing activity of our fleet. If the decision is made to divide up fishing waters by square miles of territorial waters, then the consequences would be disastrous. Other stakeholder concerns, such as those relating to the Hague Preference and the infrastructure constraints of our fishing ports, have been outlined in the Committee’s report.

Previously, under the CFP, financial assistance was available under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). That allowed the fish and aquaculture industries to improve the marine and aquatic environment and to develop areas in which fish or aquacultural activities are carried out. Our fishing harbours also used that funding for capital and infrastructural works. The Committee was keen to hear about what the Department was considering as a replacement for that funding, as the UK Government had advised that each devolved Administration will lead on their own replacement funding schemes.

The Committee heard that while there had been discussions on the matter with the British Government, nothing has yet been guaranteed. However, the Department indicated that it was hopeful that any such funding would be similar to what had been available through EMFF but that it would be subject to the spending review. Stakeholders welcomed the assurance that a replacement scheme for EMFF was being considered. Nevertheless, the Committee has highlighted a number of concerns in relation to that in its report.

12.15 pm

One of the concerns is whether the new scheme would be compatible with the state aid considerations contained in article 10 of the protocol. That is very significant, given what the Internal Market Bill states regarding state aid. Members will be glad to know that I do not intend to outline all our concerns here; instead, I will refer them to page 18 of our report.

The Committee report also draws attention to a number of factors outside the Bill that will impact on the implementation of its provision. Those include the

implementation of the protocol, trade agreements, the voisinage agreement, migrant labour and marine conservation. While the detail of that is on pages 18 to 24 of the report, I want to touch on some of the key points.

It remains unclear to the Committee what the interface between the Fisheries Bill and the protocol will be. That uncertainty is further compounded by the Internal Market Bill. For example, there are many unanswered questions, including potential issues around the minimum landing size, the marketing of seafood produce, the risk of regulatory divergence and whether the annex 2 commitments will have an adverse financial cost on the fishing industry. The Committee is aware that there is uncertainty about where fish can be sold. Currently, any fish landed here are sold to the EU and are subject to free market access. How that may change after Brexit is unclear.

I will now quickly mention the voisinage agreement, which allows reciprocal access to fish in the nought- to six-nautical-mile zone between the territorial waters of North and South. It had operated successfully until 2016 when the legality of the agreement was challenged by a number of Irish anglers. That led to a court case that then banned boats from the North in Irish waters, despite the previously agreed limit. However, the Sea Fisheries (Amendment) Act was introduced by the Irish Government in April 2019, and the previous arrangement was reinstated. The Committee explored the issue with officials, who advised that they are keen to keep the voisinage agreement separate from the general fisheries agreement with the EU. The Committee has stated that it would like to see all efforts made to maintain that and the good relations that currently exist between the fishing industries across the island of Ireland.

The importance of migrant labour in the fishing industry cannot be overstated. There has been a reliance on workers from overseas labour markets for many years, and the fishing industry would not be able to cope without them.

On the issue of marine conservation, the Committee noted that we do not have fully devolved competency in that area. The Minister has written to his DEFRA counterpart to raise that issue. We had an update on that at our meeting on 24 September, and we will continue to follow it up as time goes on.

Furthermore, the Committee noted that there will be considerable implications for marine conservation arising out of the Environment Bill and a crossover with the Agriculture Bill, but it was unable to explore that further due to the time constraints placed upon it.

The Committee is concerned that many of the provisions in the Bill will be enacted by secondary legislation that provides less of a scrutiny role or opportunity for amendment than that which is provided through primary legislation.

The Committee heard from departmental officials on 24 September that there have been a number of amendments to the Bill, as well as a number of anticipated amendments that will be tabled at Report stage. The amendments that have been made include the following: extending the time frame in which the joint fisheries statement is to be published; ability to publish information on financial assistance; amendments to the Conservation of Seals Act 1970 and the Wildlife Order to allow for trade to

the USA; a technical amendment to the definition of minimum conservation reference size; and the electronic communication of the granting of temporary licences.

Officials further advised that the amendments to be tabled at Report stage that will impact on this jurisdiction are the following: powers for the Department to regulate fishing for marine conservation in our offshore regions; amendments to six statutory rules to ensure that the restrictions and requirements in them will apply equally to all fishing vessels to fish in the NI zone; and powers for the devolved Administrations to enter into arrangements with other organisations, including marine management.

The Committee discussed that update with the officials in the short time that it had and agreed that, due to the lack of information and the limited time that it had to consider the amendments, it had been unable to fully explore and understand the potential impacts and implications for the jurisdiction. That difficulty has been further compounded by the fact that it is being asked to do so in the context of the legal uncertainties around the Internal Market Bill and the withdrawal agreement. That is all that I want to say as Chair of the AERA Committee.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to comment today. As Members will be aware, deep-sea fishing and fishing rights for our trawler crews have been a constant concern over many years, with highly charged debates over fishing stocks, quotas, sustainability, rights and access to waters. At the heart of the discontent is EU policy that has been detrimental to our indigenous trawler crews. Ask any of our trawler crews in Northern Ireland and they will agree that EU policies, over the years, have had a truly negative and damaging effect on industry in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I welcome the legislative consent motion before the House today and the fact that fishermen across the United Kingdom will, in my view, be in a much better position fishing in UK waters post-transition than has been the case for many years.

The Bill is vital because after the UK leaves the common fisheries policy, the Bill will provide a legal framework for the United Kingdom to go forward as an independent coastal state under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982. It is essential to provide important continuity and a seamless transition from EU fishing law to administration and protection under UK-wide and specific devolved nations' regulations. The Bill is a combination of elements from the common fisheries policy and other objectives that have been tailored to best help and sustain our fishing industry in the United Kingdom. That is only to be expected, given the opportunity that is presented by leaving the European Union. It will be absolute folly if Westminster, the Assembly and other devolved regions did not make the very best of this opportunity to ensure that our fishermen are offered the greatest opportunity of establishing a thriving industry, post-transition, given that control can be regained over UK waters. It is also important to understand that control does not mean preventing access to our waters, but rather access to waters can be much more effectively controlled and monitored. This is a key element of sustainability and growth.

Sustainability has been one of the biggest debating points and, of course, it is the most vital part of the new arrangements. I believe that it will be adequately addressed as all stakeholders realise that sustainability

of fishing stock is vital for their long-term survival as an industry. Our seas are a hugely important resource, both for food and our priceless marine environment. Our seas must be treated with the respect required to preserve the balance in marine environment and to ensure that a high-quality food resource is sustained for many more years to come. The Bill provides the opportunity to ensure that those important elements are protected by a protocol that is better suited to our coastal resources and not a quagmire of legislation that is untimely.

The Hague preference has an impact on Northern Ireland, and it is important that these types of straitjackets can be cast off as part of the new arrangements and be replaced with much more reasonable and tailored regulations. I have listened, in Committee, to much anxiety from some parties around the table on this issue. However, they must see the opportunity that exists with this important opportunity to right many EU legislative wrongs. There will be further opportunities ahead through the joint fisheries statement process, and I know that the industry, the Minister and the Committee will have more input in the finer detail. That will be an important process. I support the motion.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for presenting the legislative consent motion today. From the SDLP's point of view, we welcome the opportunity to debate the legislative consent motion on the Fisheries Bill. As the Chairman said, I raised the issue at the Committee on Thursday around the lack of information on the legislative consent motion and the limited time that the Committee had to consider it. It has been unable to fully explore and understand the potential impacts and implications for this jurisdiction. This difficulty has been further compounded by the fact that I and other legislatures are being asked to do so in the context of the legal uncertainties around the UK Internal Market Bill and the withdrawal agreement.

The legislative consent motion is required to provide for a new legal framework to replace the common fisheries policy because of Brexit. There is concern that the legislative consent, although delayed, may still be sought for prematurely. The COVID-19 pandemic and Westminster parliamentary procedures have severely restricted the Assembly's ability to properly scrutinise this and, indeed, other elements of legislation needed for the end of the transition period. Questions remain about provisions for aquaculture and marine conservation, the impact of climate change and the details of the proposals for legally binding fisheries management plans. There may also be significant changes in circumstances due to the ongoing negotiations between the UK and the EU for a future agreement on fisheries. Fisheries access remains a key focus of attention of any future UK/EU trade agreement and both sides appear to be still some distance apart from those separate objectives.

Fisheries is a sector that has been impacted by the British Government's unilaterally declared intention to break with the terms of the Ireland protocol in the withdrawal agreement. Some Members may imagine that breaking that protocol will make life easier for the fisheries sector, but I suspect that they may be mistaken.

The UK Government's negotiating tactics on this issue have merely increased the large degree of uncertainty that was already there for the fisheries sector, and indeed, a multiplicity of other sectors. The good relations that

currently exist between and with the fishing industries across the entire island of Ireland are also not addressed by the Bill. Such good relations depend heavily on trust and that trust has been severely tested by the British Government's negotiating tactics.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Yes, sure.

Mr Storey: I have listened to the Committee Chair and the Member talking about the great relationships that have existed between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. However, it was only in 2019 that they were forced to put into law something that had been in place since the 1960s, providing access for boats from Northern Ireland to fish off the limits of the Irish Republic. I have to say that it took them a long time to catch on, excuse the pun. Clearly, that proves that they wanted the benefit of our waters, and we were unable to get the benefit of theirs.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for his intimate knowledge of the legislature of the Irish Republic.

Mr Storey: And?

Mr McGlone: In addition, there are areas of the Bill where clarification is still needed. The Bill grants the UK Secretary of State at DEFRA the power to set fisheries objectives and fishing opportunities for the local fleet. There is little detail yet of what those objectives will mean or how they will be delivered. We will, in effect, be told where the fleet can fish and how much it can catch, as calculated by a yet-to-be-determined method.

In the latest amendments to the Bill — I heard the Minister said that there are further later amendments to it — the Secretary of State will be given more time to come to a decision on those matters before publishing the joint fisheries statement. It might have been better to seek an extension to that transition period, which would have allowed more time for detailed scrutiny of the Bill. We may have been touching upon that in Committee, too.

The sector is also heavily reliant on capital grants to maintain and improve its infrastructure. In the absence of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, the Minister's Department will be responsible for future financial assistance for the fisheries sector. To date, the Department has been unable to secure — this was touched upon earlier, and the Chair referred to it too — any commitment from the UK Government to provide funding for those schemes.

The key focus of this Bill should have been the future sustainability of the fisheries sector. To that end, it would have been better if sustainability was the prime objective of the Bill and all fisheries management decisions assessed on that basis. There is lack of clarity, for example, on how fish stocks, particularly shared stocks, will be monitored and managed through the proposed fisheries management plans. It is essential that fish stocks are not fished above independently-recommended scientific levels. We have a poor record on environmental protection and weak governance in certain areas. It is far from clear, at this point, what the impact of the Bill, and other Brexit-related crossover Bills, will have on the conservation of the marine ecosystem.

In summary, there remains a great deal of uncertainty around the provisions of the Bill and how they are to be implemented.

Mrs Barton: The fishing industry was one part of our economy that always appeared to have a strained relationship with the European Union. The common fisheries policy was, of course, the structure that regulated and controlled our fishing industry. Indeed, it has been claimed that this same policy ended many a family fishing business in Northern Ireland and livelihood in the industry.

Many in the House will recall the sector eagerly awaiting the announcement from the EU Fisheries Council each December to see what further changes in the fishing quota would be implemented in the following year.

12.30 pm

One of the criticisms of the common fisheries policy by the fishing industry is that other EU fishing boats land more fish from UK waters than UK boats. A House of Lords Library briefing on the Fisheries Bill noted:

“On average, between 2012 and 2016, other EU member states’ vessels annually landed in the region of 749,000 tonnes of fish ... caught in UK waters. 6 UK vessels landed approximately 96,000 tonnes ... caught in other member states’ waters per year in the same period.”

As 31 December approaches, there is an expectation that, when the UK exits the EU, the UK, including Northern Ireland, will be able to regulate fishing in its offshore regions again. The EU has stated that its position is to maintain as far as is possible the existing traditional arrangements for EU boats to access the fish in UK waters. However, the UK position is that it will control its own waters and that fishing opportunities will primarily be for British boats. There is considerable speculation that there could be trade-offs between EU access to UK fishing waters and access by UK financial services to EU markets.

There are a number of government amendments to the Bill at this stage that are general practical amendments. Other amendments were agreed in the Lords but were removed by the House of Commons. Those initial amendments were supported by the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force but opposed by fishing industry bodies.

While the Fisheries Bill is a legislative framework, it is very necessary to put practical and administrative aspects in place following the UK’s decision to leave the European Union. It also has the environmental sustainability of the fishing industry at its core, which will deliver a positive future for fishing and conservation. The sector, over the years, has been key to environmental sustainability in our waters; indeed, if it had not been for its management in conjunction with the authorities, the marine environment would be in a much worse place. With the framework outlined in the Fisheries Bill, I urge Members to support the legislative consent motion.

Mr Blair: On behalf of Alliance, I support the legislative consent motion, although I see it as a holding position — an interim measure — and a framework on which to build a Bill and policies that are bespoke to Northern Ireland’s unique circumstances. The Fisheries Bill goes some way towards addressing the conservation governance gaps

that our exit from the European Union exposes. However, issues remain that need to be addressed.

I express my disappointment that some key amendments were removed by the UK Government at the Public Bill Committee stage. Those amendments would have addressed sustainability as the prime objective of the Bill and provided for the introduction of remote electronic equipment and cameras on vessels. The removal of those amendments undermines the primary objective of the Bill, which is to make:

“a legal commitment to fish sustainably”.

Regarding Brexit and Northern Ireland’s unique position, the local fish processing sector, whilst small in comparison with that in other parts of the UK, makes a significant contribution to the areas in which it is based and not just in economic terms. The sea that surrounds this island supports daily lives, provides multiple resources and services, including food, renewable energy sources, tourism, leisure opportunities, physical and mental health benefits and, of course, cultural heritage. While the sea-fishing industry in Northern Ireland makes a significant contribution to our economy and culture, it is heavily reliant on accessing markets outside the region. The value of landings outside Northern Ireland waters is greater than that of local landings, which could present challenges following the transition period.

The urgency of the EU exit timetable was mentioned, as was the additional pressure of limited capacity and time for the AERA Committee to give full and proper consideration to forthcoming Bills and procedures. That is of the utmost concern when we consider the importance of the forthcoming and now delayed joint fisheries statement.

Whatever the outcome of the current process, the challenges of balancing the needs of the sector with environmental issues will remain and will be real. Human activities threaten the health of our oceans. It is estimated that over 80% of marine pollution comes from land-based activities, such as pesticides and nutrients used in agriculture ending up in coastal waters, resulting in oxygen depletion that kills marine plants and shellfish. Overfishing is, of course, also a threat to sustainability.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) estimates that 31.4% of fish stocks are either already fished to capacity or overfished. That is counterintuitive, considering that sustainable fisheries management and more abundant fish stocks can provide the fishing industry with greater long-term security. It is estimated that recovering fish stocks to healthy levels would result in a 37% rise, which is the equivalent of £241 million per year in the value of fish landings UK-wide. It would, of course, create many more jobs as well.

Now, more than ever, it is crucial that primary legislation enshrine sustainability in law, and, as a framework Bill, the Fisheries Bill provides an opportunity to do that. However, the Bill should have been changed to address a more delicate marine environment and depleted fish stocks. The Fisheries Bill presents us with an opportunity to create bespoke policies that are relevant to Northern Ireland and our unique position and to achieve lasting change for the better. Therefore, with a view to future solutions and improvements, which, I hope, the Minister can reflect on, I am content to support the LCM and do so in the knowledge

that we need to avoid further confusion and delays at this stage.

Mr Harvey: I am pleased to see the motion, as it represents another step in the journey towards taking back control of our fishing industry. I believe that, working collectively with those in the sector — the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation Ltd (NIFPO) and the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO) — and the other devolved regions, we now have the opportunity to herald a new dawn for UK fishing. Whilst the Bill will never satisfy everyone fully, it represents a practical framework and will provide certainty for the sector at this time. As my party colleague at Westminster, Jim Shannon, the MP for Strangford, said at Second Reading, the Bill is workable, fair and fit for purpose.

Flexibility is key for the industry and, therefore, key in respect of the Bill. , the Secretary of State must have sufficient capability to adapt policy decisions to meet the needs of the industry, working alongside the devolved Governments. Furthermore, flexibility is needed in order for us to set future total allowable catches (TACs) that are fair and practical, whilst ensuring that we have sufficient environmental protections to ensure long-term sustainable fish stocks.

There is a balance to be struck that works for the industry, and, with the cooperation of the industry, this practical and pragmatic approach represents a significant departure from the common fisheries policy. Proportionally speaking, Northern Ireland has the smallest sea area of any of the UK regions, and the local industry relies heavily on its ability to operate beyond local waters. I am therefore pleased that the Bill protects the rights of all UK fishermen to operate the length and breadth of our territorial waters. Such equal access will be of benefit to local fishing vessels operating further afield.

In relation to the role of DAERA, I note that the Secretary of State's remit extends to offshore waters of Northern Ireland only. That should be devolved, in keeping with other regions, and I encourage the Minister to make representations on that point.

Briefly and in conclusion, should the NI protocol be enacted, it must not be allowed to place any additional burdens on our fishing industry. As with other sectors, our fish suppliers must have unfettered access to the GB market if they are to compete and if we are to have an economically viable industry. As a Strangford representative, I can speak about the decades of damage that have been inflicted by the shackles of EU bureaucracy on the fishing industry. Under the Fisheries Bill, our fishermen will be able to fish in their own waters, land their catches in our own ports, create economic growth and rekindle an industry that has been all but denied by Europe. I wish the Bill well as it moves to Report and Third Reading in the coming days.

Mr McGuigan: We have had enough debates in the Chamber to establish that there is little, if anything, positive resulting from Brexit. We have also had enough evidence to suggest that the current British Government are not exactly trustworthy, and that is particularly the case where the interests of the island of Ireland are concerned. Giving consent via the LCM with that knowledge and experience of Boris Johnson and the Tories and in the context of no overall agreement with the EU on fisheries is akin to

watching the film, 'Salem's Lot' from behind the sofa and hoping that everyone in the town remains safe. Never mind their duplicity in the Internal Market Bill, they are also trying to untangle the commitment contained in the political declaration that fishing would be linked to the overall trade negotiations. That fact undermines the trade negotiations, which are vital to the future economy of this island. It would not be particularly prudent for the Assembly to give carte blanche to the Westminster Parliament until we know what kind of deal, if any, is worked out with the EU on fishing rights. I note that that position is shared by the Scottish and Welsh representatives who attempted to stall the Bill at Second Reading in Westminster until or if an agreement was reached with EU negotiators.

Over and above the clear political danger of allowing the British Government to proceed with the Bill, as a member of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, I obviously share the concerns on the details or lack of details outlined by the Committee Chair and other Committee members. In particular, I note the comments of officials about the potential increase in opportunities for the local fishing fleet. The officials said that the main fishing opportunities are mostly in the Irish Sea and no major change to the quota is anticipated.

The Committee has not been afforded the time to properly explore the impact of the Bill on the North. There is no certainty about how or if the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund will be replaced. The EMFF is an important fund for the local fishing fleet. The Bill does not mention the post-Brexit impact on the migrant workers who currently make up 50% of those employed on trawlers in the North. As with all things, the fishing industry is heavily integrated North and South. Whether it is buyers, producers, processors or landings North and South, they are all interdependent, and the Bill does not take that into account. It remains unclear how the Bill will interact with the Irish protocol, and the uncertainty is complicated and compounded by the Internal Market Bill.

I have concerns that are, again, shared by representatives in other devolved Parliaments in Scotland and Wales that aspects of the policy that should be devolved can be overridden by clause 12, which gives power of decision to the British Government. Indeed, responsibility for the designation and management of marine protected areas in the North's waters will lie not with the Assembly, as it should, but with the British Secretary of State. The British Government will be responsible for deciding quotas.

Over and above that and with all the other aspects about amendments being taken out and the concerns shared by members of the AERA Committee, I do not think that we can allow the LCM to proceed.

Ms Ennis: I welcome the opportunity to air my views on the Bill. Simply put, the Bill is not fit for purpose. It is riddled with loopholes, contradictions and vague language. The British Government may claim that they are taking back their waters, but the Bill is being sold on the same false premise as Brexit was. If the British Government fail to reach an agreement with the EU by the end of this year, it will mean that control of the waters around these islands will be governed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which requires cooperation on efforts to agree rules and access to waters as well as setting catch limits and standards on the conservation and management of marine resources. As my colleague and Chair of the

AERA Committee, Declan McAleer, mentioned, there is no detail in the Bill of what will happen to migrant workers or of how the vital EU funding that the North's fishing industry receives will be replaced or how much.

12.45 pm

As has been pointed out by the Welsh and Scottish Governments, Westminster has used every opportunity since Brexit to scale back devolution. Responsibility for the designation and management of marine protected areas in the North's offshore waters will not lie with the Assembly but with the Secretary of State. Clause 12 states that, although devolved Administrations will control their own fisheries, they will be subject to the terms and conditions of any trade agreements that the British Government make with other countries. We can develop all the regulations and rules that we like around access, environmental protection and sustainability, but it all counts for nothing once the British Government sign a deal with another trading bloc.

The British Government will be responsible for deciding how quotas are distributed between England, Scotland, Wales and the North. That is a huge conflict of interest given that the Tories have everything to gain from favouring fishermen in England and nothing to lose by dealing a bad hand to fishermen in Scotland, Wales and here in the North. Does anyone think that a Government who boasted only recently about breaking international law will see any issue with acting as poacher and gamekeeper when it comes to quotas?

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: No, I will not. Thank you.

The Bill makes multiple references to how devolved Administrations will be consulted about various issues, such as landing requirements, but it does not make clear what the actual power of devolved Administrations will be on those issues. We know all too well here that being consulted by the British Government means nothing. We were consulted about our views on Brexit, and, on providing them, those views were promptly ignored. The Government have shown that they cannot be trusted. We require definitive language that cannot be misinterpreted or abused.

Other powers that should be in the hands of devolved institutions but are being reserved by Whitehall include provisions about fisheries and aquaculture and powers to impose quotas; limit time at sea; mandate processing procedures; determining what gear can be used and how; deciding how fisheries products can be marketed; imposing regulations over landings; and setting targets on marine stock and rules around enforcement. The Bill has little to say of substance about boats under 10 metres, which make up the majority of our fleet and are vital for the sustainability of our oceans and our coastal communities.

There is so much about the Bill that is unknown, ranging from how annex 2 of the protocol will affect fishermen and tariffs, to issues around migrant workers, abandoned vessels and boats owned in one jurisdiction but docked in another. How are we supposed to consent to something when we do not even fully know what we are supposed to be consenting to? The Bill is an attempt to shoehorn us into a framework that suits England. It is not cognisant of

the interconnectedness and all-island nature of our local fishing industry.

Mr O'Toole: There are specific and general concerns about the Bill to which we are being asked to give consent today. The provisions that establish an alternative to the common fisheries policy are necessary to regulate fishing in the UK following the end of the transition period. There is no denying that we need something to replace the provisions in retained EU law and the common fisheries policy. However, I put on record my frustration; the Bill is yet another example of rushed-through Brexit legislation that touches on a devolved competence that we are being asked to consent to with minimal opportunity for scrutiny and without information about what it means for local fisheries in the long term.

The Chair of the Committee mentioned earlier that his Committee had been able to take just one day of evidence. The Committee was also explicit in raising several concerns about the Bill in its reports. It noted that, due to the limited time to scrutinise the Bill, it has been unable to fully explore and understand the potential effects and implications for the local fishing industry and the associated processing industry, which are myriad, as we have discussed today.

In effect, we are being asked to give consent to a Bill and powers that we do not fully understand. That was the case yesterday, and I am afraid that it will be the case, probably, in the weeks and months to come. We are not being given sufficient time to debate and scrutinise the myriad legislation, both primary and secondary, that relates to Brexit.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. As a Member for the South Down constituency, I am fully aware of the many households that depend on the fishing industry for their main source of income. Is it true to say that the discussion here today has silenced those voices? There has not been an opportunity for those who are deeply invested in the welfare of the industry to give an opinion the Bill going through the House today.

Mr O'Toole: As someone who grew up a few miles from Ardglass, I think that you are right. It is definitely clear that we need to hear from the local fishing industry in detail, albeit it is true that it also wants to see support.

It is also true, as people have mentioned on the other side of the Chamber, that large parts of the fishing industry have been sceptical about the common fisheries policy and other aspects of EU membership over the years. It is worth saying, however, that the majority of Northern Ireland's catch goes to the EU market. It is true that parts of our industry have disliked the quota system that has operated for several decades, but, having caught the fish, they recognise that they need a market in which to sell it.

I will go back to a couple of specific concerns. First, there are question marks, as others have said, over how the provisions interact with the protocol and, indeed, over whether they will comply with the commitments made to abide by EU regulation on things such as safety at sea, marine pollution, and fishing limits for species conservation in marine ecosystems. Another specific example that the Bill touches on is aquaculture. The Bill is silent on the aquaculture industries that are in cross-border bodies of water. It does not say anything about the trout in Lough Melvin or the oysters in Carlingford lough. I

am afraid that it is a fact that we in Northern Ireland share bodies of water with the rest of Ireland, and we need to understand what DAERA is doing to reflect that.

Secondly, I agree with those who raised concerns about the fact that the attempt by the House of Lords to promote sustainability as the primary criterion for fishing stocks was removed from the Bill. That is regrettable. I ask the Minister to clarify his position on sustainability as it relates to Northern Ireland and its quotas.

Thirdly, there is an issue around the access that our fishing industry — trawlers and the fish and seafood processing industry — has to migrant labour. Frankly, both rely on it. It is a huge issue for them. Although the legislation does not reflect on immigration, it is the case that this is another sector in which a Northern Ireland industry is being negatively impacted on by the immigration policy being pursued by the Home Office. This should not be a question of your view on the protocol but a question of whether the UK Government will finally listen to Northern Ireland about how migration policy can be adjusted locally. I ask the Minister to take that matter up with his colleague in the Economy Department. As I said, it would be useful to hear from DAERA about how it plans to mitigate the negative impact that the new UK immigration policy would have on our skills base.

A couple of Members talked about the voisinage arrangement. Mr Storey mentioned it, the differential arrangements and the different approach taken by trawlers from the South. He is right that those are ongoing issues. No one hides away from them, but they are something that we need the Department to establish, and this legislation does not establish how the interaction will work between trawlers that move North/South.

Let us be absolutely clear: a lot of the fishing industry that has been most vocal about wanting Brexit and massively increased quotas is made up of fishing organisations in the north of Scotland. There is a simple reason for that. They get a hell of a lot more water to fish from. Much more fishing happens in the North Sea, which is much bigger, and they have much greater access to it. Fair enough. The UK waters in which Northern Ireland trawlers largely fish are in the Irish Sea. As others have mentioned, it is not clear that there is going to be a particular increase in quotas in the Irish Sea. Nor is it clear what is going to happen to Northern Ireland trawlers' access if they sail a few miles offshore from Kilkeel and into Irish waters. We therefore need to hear from the Department on how the Bill is going to affect that. If that involves bilateral working with Dublin, I am absolutely happy with that. I am glad that the Minister is willing —

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I am more than happy to give way.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much for raising an interesting point about our Northern Ireland fishing fleet. Of course, however, some of our fleet has the opportunity to fish in other United Kingdom waters, particularly down in the Celtic Sea. One of the biggest issues that we have in the Celtic Sea is that the French fishing fleet takes about 84% of the quota of cod. Perhaps with the changes that are likely to come out of this new fishing legislation, there will be greater opportunity for Northern Ireland fishing vessels to fish around our waters.

Mr O'Toole: That is possibly the case. I do not know if the Member has spoken to many trawlers from Ardglass and Kilkeel who sail all the way down there. That is fine; they have to go through a lot of the Irish Sea to get to the Celtic Sea. That is fair enough. As I said, once they catch it, they need a market to sell it to. That is a critical point. It is clear that a lot of the fishing industry is frustrated with the way in which the common fisheries policy operated. No one disputes that, but it is also true that we need to have a market to sell the fish to. A large part of the market for fish from Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK and, indeed, the island of Ireland, has been in other parts of the UK. Unless we have a comprehensive deal that includes fisheries, we are going to have a severe market access problem. Do Members have a strategy for us comprehensively changing the fish that we consume here, because a lot of the fish that is landed here is not popular in our domestic market?

I move now to the question of the joint fisheries statement and the NI zone, which the Minister talked about in his introduction. It would be good to get clarity on the role of the Assembly and DAERA in the development of that new joint fisheries statement. As the Bill stands, it is unclear how that will operate. Members have talked about the new opportunities for trawlers, but the new opportunities for trawlers from Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie are a little bit smaller than those for trawlers fishing out of Peterhead or Fraserburgh. If these are new opportunities, be explicit about what they are and how the joint fisheries statement will deliver on them. As the Bill stands, it is unclear how that will operate. In part, to be blunt, that is because Northern Ireland has smaller territorial waters than Scotland, for example.

The fact of the matter is that the UK, including Northern Ireland, exports a large proportion of the fish that we catch. Indeed, we import the majority of what is consumed domestically. Between 2014 and 2016, the EU made up 94% of Northern Ireland's international fish exports and 82% of its international fish imports. In 2016, the Northern Ireland fishing industry sold around £12.8 million to the local market and £28 million — well over double — to the EU market. Those are hard facts when it comes to market access. I respect what Members have said about people's objections to the common fisheries policy, and, yes, there needs to be a legal replacement for it, but let us be clear about market access and how that works. Access to EU markets will be critical for our fishing industry, going forward, but, unfortunately, we have little clarity on that.

Members have talked about the importance of the negotiations between the UK and the EU. The Minister mentioned that when he talked about clause 16 and reciprocal access. He and I have talked about the protocol. It is fair to say that we feel slightly differently, to put it diplomatically, about the delivery of the Ireland protocol. First, I gently remind him that he is duty-bound to deliver on it. Secondly, given what he said about clause 16, I hope that he agrees that it would be in the interests of our fishing industry and, more broadly, our economy, if the UK and EU could agree a deal, and that that should be something that is deliverable upon, because that would make everyone's life much easier. However, unfortunately in relation to the Bill, from what we have seen from the UK Government's approach to the negotiations, delivering on the protocol and, more broadly, protecting Northern Ireland, we have much to fear.

In conclusion, I understand the necessity for bringing the LCM to the House and the need for something to replace the common fisheries policy, but I have significant concerns which have yet to be answered about the specifics in relation to much in the Bill and how it will affect our fishing industry in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the House, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be questions to the Minister for the Economy. This debate will resume immediately after Question Time, and the first Member who is scheduled to speak is Steve Aiken.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.59 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Economy

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question 1 has been withdrawn, as has topical question 4.

COVID-19: Support for NEETs

2. Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy how she is identifying and supporting young people, not in employment, education or training (NEETs), that feel isolated as a consequence of the response to COVID-19. (AQO 765/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): In today's uncertain times, this is an important question for us, as a legislative Assembly, to consider.

My Department provides a range of support to young people who are not in employment, education or training, often referred to as "NEET". My Department administers the Northern Ireland European social fund (ESF) programme, which includes 18 NEET projects with a value of over £33 million. The projects are specifically designed to support young people. Examples of the projects are wide-ranging across Northern Ireland. We have Bryson Charitable Group, Extern, GEMS, Include Youth, Job Directions, the South West College, Springboard, Stepping Stones NI, the Prince's Trust, Training for Women and YouthAction Northern Ireland, so it is really a very wide range of programmes that are supported through this part of my Department.

The Department for the Economy is also the Northern Ireland accountable Department for Peace4Youth, which aims to engage 7,400 young people who are disadvantaged, marginalised and not readily engaging with other programmes. The Careers Service provides all-age, all-ability careers guidance, with a priority focus on helping those vulnerable to social exclusion. Inevitably, the response to COVID-19 and the lockdown, in particular, has made it more difficult to deliver those vital services. However, the services and projects have adapted to continue to provide much-needed support throughout the crisis. In March, Peace4Youth projects swiftly moved to online delivery to continue to support young people. ESF projects also moved to remote working. Some are now back working in their usual premises, where social distancing allows. Since March, the Careers Service has made over 49,000 contacts with 16- to 18-year-olds to guide them in taking the next steps in their education, training or employment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call John O'Dowd.

Mr O'Dowd: Do you want to call Claire for a supplementary?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Oh, sorry. Excuse me.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Deputy Speaker.

I appreciate the Minister's response. She talked about the European social fund: I have been contacted by a number of community and voluntary groups who are concerned about the future of that fund. If it is likely that that fund will no longer have a future, will her Department fund the shortfall, if it becomes an issue?

Mrs Dodds: That is indeed an important and, again, topical and timely question on the issue. The European social fund funds a range of programmes, not just for young people who are not in employment or training but as part of the Northern Ireland apprenticeship programme. Therefore, it is very important to us that the Executive collectively engage with the UK Government to ensure that our national Government understand that, in the replacement for that European social fund — the shared prosperity fund — Northern Ireland is not at a disadvantage and gains the same amount of funding from that shared prosperity funding as it does from structural funds as they come to Northern Ireland and, importantly, that we are able to set our own priorities and objectives for the funding as a devolved legislature with responsibility devolved in those areas. The lead Department for this is the Department of Finance. It has been working on this, and, of course, I will continue to liaise with it and with Departments in London to make sure that those views are known. Current ESF funding is secure until 31 March 2022.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister will be aware that, since 2007, despite increased investment in Invest NI, it has actually created fewer jobs year on year. Does the Minister agree that we need to hold what we have at the moment and that there should be increased investment in apprenticeships, youth services and our students, so that we create a future for the young people who have been so badly affected by COVID-19?

Mrs Dodds: It is an important question. I think that the House will agree that, through my actions as Minister for the Economy, we have invested significantly in apprenticeships, youth training and the skills agenda in Northern Ireland. That is not just important for holding what we have but for developing the economy of the future and the skills pipeline that will go into that. That is an important aspect. The Department has been proactive in looking not just at apprenticeships but at careers delivery and other short-term interventions that will help to build the Northern Ireland economy, build skills and engage our young people into the future.

I just want to focus for one second on one of those programmes, which has been very important, namely the assured skills academies that we have run. Those have been very successful in delivering proper training and jobs for young people in difficult circumstances. I refer to the Microsoft cybersecurity academy, which was completed in Northern Ireland on 12 June, delivered at the height of lockdown and delivered completely online. Of the 24 young people who engaged in that skills academy, 23 found employment out of it. Those long-term skills programmes and the ability to be flexible and match skills to labour market demand is really important.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer the other part of the Member's question. It is really important that, while we build our skills base and support companies in Northern Ireland, we recognise the importance of foreign direct investment in Northern Ireland. Since April, I have announced over 1,000 new jobs, even in

the midst of incredibly difficult economic circumstances in Northern Ireland. Six hundred of those new jobs have been announced by North American and US companies. That shows the importance of those companies investing in Northern Ireland. I look forward to talking to the special envoy to Northern Ireland tomorrow and building the relationships that allow those skills and job pipelines to continue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I just remind the Minister of the two-minute rule. If you require additional time, perhaps you would ask for it before you answer, please, Minister. Thank you.

Ms Hunter: Is the Minister engaging with the Department of Education in order to deliver an effective strategy to deal with young people who are leaving school with low qualifications and at risk of unemployment?

Mrs Dodds: Before the Assembly collapsed in earlier times, the Minister of Education and the Minister for the Economy were working together on a strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds to look at the pathways that young people take at that age, the choices that they make and how we can improve services for them. Very early on, before the impact of COVID in this mandate, I had been talking to the Department of Education on that issue. We have now re-engaged with that work stream. I would like, in conjunction with the Department of Education, to bring forward a strategy that allows young people at 14 to 19 years old not just to look at traditional paths but to look at alternative paths towards their career prospects. We will help all of our young people in progressing their career prospects. We are also talking about creating that digital spine for Northern Ireland. We will try to incorporate those skills for our young people, right the way through from primary school until they leave education, preparing them for the world of work and the economy of the future.

Mr Nesbitt: The Prime Minister has just announced a scheme in England for adults without an A-level or equivalent qualification where they will have access to a fully funded college course with an emphasis on "skills valued by employers". Can the Minister assure adults in a similar position in this jurisdiction that they will not be disadvantaged?

Mrs Dodds: I am extremely concerned about the 20% of the workforce who have no formal qualifications. It is an issue that the Assembly and the Executive will have to address in the long term. In the short term, we have been working with adults and with everyone, really, who has been affected by the impact of COVID on their employment. Our skills strategy division has been able to support 2,000 individuals impacted by COVID-19, helping them to achieve one of over 90 online fully accredited qualifications in key areas including digital, leadership, management and employability. A second phase of the programme will complete by March 2021. We hope that it will support a further 3,000 individuals, including those who have been furloughed or made redundant or who are availing of the self-employment scheme. It will include collaborative approaches from further education on placement and to support women to return and get training in information technology. That is work that the Department is already engaged in and fully cognisant of.

Mr Dickson: Minister, will you recognise the despair of my constituents, when you have recently told the

House, in a previous answer, that you hope that the UK Government understand the value of EU funds that have been distributed in Northern Ireland? Surely, you and your party would not have dragged us out of the EU if you are only now conducting those negotiations with the UK Government.

Mrs Dodds: I shall resist, just this once, the Brexit issues in order to focus on the really important issue of skills in the Northern Ireland economy. I have been proactively engaging with my counterparts in London on the issue of the European social fund and its replacement, the shared prosperity fund. I will further support the Finance Minister as he seeks a full replacement of those funds for Northern Ireland. It is absolutely important that we are able to progress these issues for the people of Northern Ireland, for the young people of Northern Ireland and particularly for the economy of the future of Northern Ireland.

Post-Brexit Trade Arrangements

3. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for the Economy, given the short timescale before the end of the transition period and that Northern Ireland will only have access to trade deals as part of the United Kingdom, for an update on progress on the prospects for trading arrangements. (AQO 766/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: During my time as Minister for the Economy, I have continued to work with our national Government to ensure that UK international trade policy works for the people of Northern Ireland. It has been my priority that Northern Ireland will be able to access transitioned EU trade deals and new UK trade agreements. I have had extensive engagement with the Minister of State in the Department for International Trade through the Ministerial Forum for Trade and via bilateral meetings on matters of interest to Northern Ireland.

I have sought assurances that Northern Ireland will be covered fully in the scope of trade agreements, that our industry will be protected from unfair practices and that our businesses can remain competitive, both in the UK internal market and globally, despite the complexities of the protocol.

2.15 pm

From that perspective, it is critical to recognise that Great Britain is our most important market, accounting for almost £24 billion of trade in 2018. During the same period, trade with the EU, including the Republic of Ireland, amounted to £12.1 billion and trade with the rest of the world to £6.9 billion. In other words, we did more trade in the GB market than in all of the other markets added together. Therefore, it is very important that, when we are looking at international trade, we are also protecting our trade with our internal UK market.

In tandem, I have been encouraging the UK Government to pursue with vigour a comprehensive trade agreement with the European Union. I support the Government's ambition to have an agreement that supports our trade with Europe and, through supply-chain activity, our trade via Europe that goes into international markets.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. The figures for trade with the European Union and the rest of the world are still very significant, Minister, and

we may need them even more when this thing is settled. Given the British Government's success in trashing our international reputation, as seen in the explicit statements from the United States, particularly from Mr Mulvaney, just yesterday, about the consequences of interfering with the Good Friday Agreement, how does the Minister assess the potential, for example, for a trading agreement with America?

Mrs Dodds: First of all, it is vital that Northern Ireland is able to trade within UK trade agreements on an equal basis to every other part of the United Kingdom. That, of course, is complicated by the protocol, and I fail to understand why many parties in the House rush headlong to demand a full implementation, no less, of a protocol that would potentially restrict trade within the UK's internal market. Therefore, while trade with the rest of the world, including the European Union and the Republic of Ireland, is vital, and I do not underestimate it or diminish it in any sense at all, it is of utter importance to Northern Ireland that trade within the UK's internal market is able to continue unencumbered by restrictions imposed by the Northern Ireland protocol. I think that is massively important.

It is also extremely important that we are able to trade with other international markets. Trade within the current EU free trade agreements that have been rolled over is worth £110 billion to the UK. We have some outstanding trade agreements with the EU that are very significant to Northern Ireland that have still not been renegotiated by the Government. They include agreements with Canada, Mexico, Turkey and Norway. Canada is our second largest rest of the world trading partner, with an estimated £632 million of trade in 2019.

In terms of the US trade deal, again, America is an extremely important market for Northern Ireland companies, and the fourth negotiation on the US trade deal took place between the 8 and 18 September, and —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Minister, sorry to interrupt, but we have overshot by quite a bit. I thought you were finished with that.

Mrs Dodds: Could I give just two more stats, which I think are very important? With your permission Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Just very briefly, please.

Mrs Dodds: Again, trade negotiations with Australia began again on 22 September, and we are looking forward to trade negotiations with New Zealand on 19 October.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answers, and for her efforts in working with businesses during the COVID crisis. Invest NI has an important role in supporting businesses through this terrible crisis. What other support is available from Invest NI and the Department for the Economy to help struggling businesses to come through this ongoing crisis?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Over the course of the pandemic, my Department has administered £400 million in grant schemes and helped 30,000 businesses in Northern Ireland. That has not been perfect nor are we able to say that it covered the full scope of the business spectrum. However, that help has been extremely important in sustaining businesses and skills in a difficult time.

If we continue on the Brexit theme, Invest NI is offering Brexit preparation grants. I am glad that the Member raised this issue because we need to get the message out that a full toolkit of resources is available within Invest NI to help businesses to prepare for the end of the transition period. InterTradelreland also has a significant level of interventions in place. I encourage Members to convey these messages to businesses so that they can get the help that they need in the circumstances that we find ourselves.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Can the Minister outline if she or her Department contributed to any response from the Executive to the UK Government's internal market White Paper consultation in June, especially in relation to future trading relationships and the NI protocol?

Mrs Dodds: We continue to engage with our partners in government and responded to the White Paper. While there are many views in the House on the Internal Market Bill, and I suspect that they would not all accord with my view, there are principles that we need to acknowledge and accept as being vital for Northern Ireland.

The Internal Market Bill looks at unfettered access in the case of a no-deal and the EU refuses to acknowledge GB as a third country. It is vital that Northern Ireland firms have unfettered access to the GB market.

Other issues are of equal importance in relation to access to our markets. We need our Government to tell us how, in conjunction with the Joint Committee, they are going to define goods at risk. That will be important in getting those goods from GB, our largest market, into Northern Ireland.

We also need, as a matter of great importance and urgency, the issue of a Northern Ireland qualifying good resolved. The Northern Ireland qualifying good, and some of the issues around that, would stop others from using the Republic of Ireland as a back door into the GB market, and, therefore, impacting on Northern Ireland firms' competitiveness in that market.

There are many issues to be resolved. We could talk about state aid, and the fact that Northern Ireland would be encumbered with EU state aid regulations while the rest of the United Kingdom would be free to make more-generous subsidies available for businesses if it were so inclined.

I want Northern Ireland to succeed —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Minister —

Mrs Dodds: — and I want its economy to succeed.

Apprenticeships

4. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the impact of leaving the European Union will have on funding available for upskilling workers and apprenticeships. (AQO 767/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: EU funding contributes to increasing the skills base of those currently in employment and future potential participants and part funds DFE apprenticeship programmes.

My Department currently receives £10.4 million per annum from the European social fund (ESF) to fund our Apprenticeships NI and higher level apprenticeship programmes. Any funding loss will restrict our ability to

recruit new apprentices or fully see out the upskilling of existing apprentices on those programmes. In order to maintain the scale of those programmes, the shortfall in funding will need to be sourced and funded. That is currently being considered as part of my Department's succession planning for provision post-EU exit.

The Department of Finance is leading the case for full replacement of EU funding in Northern Ireland. Given the amount of funding that historically came to my Department for economic development, energy, skills and apprenticeships, the Department has been liaising closely with Finance and relevant Westminster Ministers to ensure that our needs and priorities are reflected in those negotiations.

Mrs C Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister recently made a bid for £22.6 million so that the European social fund money could continue to be provided from April 2022 to March 2023. She will be aware of how important that ESF funding is in tackling youth unemployment. With considerable numbers of young people now being made redundant, does the Minister accept that the loss of European funding will have a detrimental impact on support for young people, particularly with the loss of the European social fund?

Mrs Dodds: While it is important to acknowledge that the European social fund has done significant and some very good work in Northern Ireland around the subject that we were talking about earlier — those young people who are not in employment or training and in funding apprenticeships — we are currently engaged in negotiations with our national Government around the replacement for that funding, which is the shared prosperity fund. The parameters that the Finance Minister has set for that is that we should receive the same amount of funding from the shared prosperity fund as we currently do from the European social fund. With that, we are at common cause with our colleagues in Scotland and Wales.

After we have established broad frameworks for that shared prosperity fund, I would like to see the detail of that fund being administered, directed and guided by the needs of Northern Ireland and by this Assembly in exercising its functions under the devolved Administration solutions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Very briefly, we can have a quick question from Pat Catney and a quick answer too, please.

Mr Catney: Every job is vital. We all know that, and this House is aware of that. Those who go out and take risks in order to start businesses are risk takers, but, on top of that, we need training. I want a quick yes or no from the Minister. Has the Minister communicated those updates with the regional colleges? I am aware of businesses that have taken part in the scheme [*Inaudible*] on additional apprenticeships for those students so that they can find that employment? Is the Minister aware of the uptake in apprenticeships in the regional colleges —?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I did say, "Quick question". [*Laughter.*]

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I am in constant communication with all our further education colleges, and I will continue to monitor the situation. The scheme will commence in November as furlough ends for young apprentices. We are encouraging employers

to bring back young apprentices and to retain them right through to the completion of their apprenticeships.

We are also offering funding for employers who want to create new apprenticeships. This week, I launched the apprenticeship challenge fund for Northern Ireland, and the work of the further education colleges will be absolutely vital in that. After the scheme is formally launched in November, I will continue to monitor the progress of the scheme so that we can ensure that employers, businesses and colleges are able to work together.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the period for listed questions. We now move to topical questions.

2.30 pm

Economic Recovery Plan

T1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy when the Assembly will have sight of a substantive economic recovery plan, with built-in resilience for the new normal and clear and measurable outcomes and targets. (AQT 441/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. She will be aware that in June I published my short- and medium-term recovery plan, 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy'. It looked at not only the short-term but the medium-term issues that we will have to address. It also gave a vision for the future of the Northern Ireland economy. I want such an economy to take Northern Ireland into its second century and to look at new opportunities and the sectors in which we can do well — the digital sector, cybersecurity — and in which we are already a world leader. I want it not only to grab those opportunities for the new economy for Northern Ireland but to support our traditional firms and manufacturing base, and the values that we all hold very dear. That has been adopted as part of the Executive's recovery strategy. In the meantime, my Department and I are working on a strategy for the economy, which, we hope, will be ready in due course. I emphasise that I am not waiting for a strategy; I am taking the necessary steps to help the Northern Ireland economy in unprecedented circumstances.

Mrs D Kelly: In the new working normal, if you like, I wonder about the opportunities for individuals, firms and businesses to access agencies such as Invest NI to discuss those issues. What plans does the Minister have for easy access and easy business, and the role that councils might play?

Mrs Dodds: I do not know whether the Member has seen my mailbox recently, but as a Member for Upper Bann as opposed to being the Economy Minister, I have agreed to meet the local economic development agency of the ABC council. I look forward to that meeting, to which I intend to bring representatives of Invest NI in order to ensure that information is readily available and to make the necessary links between government agencies or arm's-length agencies of the Department and councils.

I continue to work with councils on the city deals strategy for Northern Ireland. As part of our medium- to long-term recovery, that is a very exciting mechanism by which to introduce new and innovative ideas. We have £500 million

of new funding for innovation in Northern Ireland, which is a significant amount for our economy. We now need to progress the city deals as part of that strategy. As a local Member, I will discuss that with the council.

COVID-19: Students

T2. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that she will know that some students at our universities are having to self-isolate because of COVID-19, for an update on the conversations that she has had with our universities about how those issues are being addressed and the students supported. (AQT 442/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question, which is important and timely. Our student population needs a clear message, and we need to support students in the circumstances in which they find themselves. I understand that university representatives met Executive Office officials this morning, and I also spoke to the universities this morning. Later this week, I will speak to student leaders to take their views. I want a more holistic approach to the issue.

Again, I appeal to our student population, remembering that the vast and overwhelming bulk of our young people and students will be respectful of the regulations and respectful of one another, and I ask them to respect the regulations, practise good hand hygiene, keep to social distancing, wear masks and obey the rules around campus so that they can keep themselves, their friends and their families safe.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response and commend her for the work that she is doing and for engaging with the universities. In that engagement, can she continue to get assurances from those who run our universities that everything possible is being done to maximise the opportunity for our students to learn? Significant fees are being paid, there are accommodation costs and the implications of reduced face-to-face contact are diminishing the experience that students get at universities, and they are asking questions about value for money. Can she ensure that the authorities in our universities are doing everything possible to provide that education?

Mrs Dodds: I assure the Member that I will continue to engage with the universities on that issue. I am acutely aware that many young people who have just gone to university for the first time, are living on their own and are struck with these kinds of situations will feel lonely and isolated, and we need to support our young students through what is a very difficult time.

I am also aware of the issues around the balance between online learning and face-to-face learning, and I think that the universities will have to work very hard to get this one right. Obviously, in some courses that have a more practical element, the universities will offer more face-to-face learning. However, I do not want our young people to have a poor experience at university. For many of us here who went to university, we look back at it with great fondness as a time in our lives when, as young people, we were pretty carefree and were able to do things. We are in unprecedented circumstances, and we want to support young people to learn and support universities to do the right thing by them.

COVID-19: Second Lockdown

T3. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy, in the light of the concerning reports about the spread of COVID-19 across Northern Ireland in recent weeks, what impact another lockdown would have on our economy. (AQT 443/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. It is extremely important. We are very concerned about the community transmission of COVID throughout our communities, and, of course, the health of our communities and of the people of Northern Ireland is of paramount importance to us, but it is equally important to say, here in the Chamber and with great clarity, that Northern Ireland simply cannot afford another lockdown.

If we think back to the provisions of the schemes in March, April and May and we look at the Chancellor's statement of last week, that will reinforce my view that, while we have to look after our health — that is absolutely vital — we also need to learn to work and live knowing that this virus is in our communities. Even the fear of another lockdown would impact on business confidence.

Therefore, again, I appeal to communities right across Northern Ireland to be careful, remember social distancing, remember good hand hygiene, look after one another, particularly the older and more vulnerable in our communities, and remember that, in order to keep our businesses going and to keep jobs and livelihoods in Northern Ireland, we have to do these things.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much, Minister, for that answer. Minister, we are faced with a trade-off between health and economic activity, and I fear that we will not know the full impact on our economy until the end of the current furlough arrangements. I urge the Minister to look at innovative ways in which to create job opportunities and employment as we eventually come out of furlough and restrictions, and to challenge Invest NI to widen its horizons with regard to investment across Northern Ireland.

Mrs Dodds: Again, I thank the Member for his question. I am on record as saying that I think that, with the furlough scheme ending in October, there is potential for a further spike in redundancies. Over the last period, we have seen around 9,000 redundancies in Northern Ireland, 4,000 of which have already been confirmed. That situation could get worse. To keep our economy functioning, we must keep businesses open. To keep businesses open, we must obey the health advice and all of the regulations.

I am saddened that there are restrictions on the hospitality sector in Northern Ireland. I believe that the hospitality sector has acted responsibly and with good faith and has interacted with the Executive and particularly with me as the Minister for the Economy. Therefore, I want to see those restrictions lifted and lessened as much as we can. We all have it in our own power to do that. We need to exercise personal responsibility and obey the regulations. We also need to ensure that our economy and our businesses remain open and that the world knows that Northern Ireland is open for business.

With your permission to continue, Mr Speaker, I was really delighted to attend the Irish Open at the weekend and to see players from all over the world competing in Ballymena and to know that the message that Northern Ireland is

open for business and can put on these events safely was going right across the world. That is an important message for us to get out to potential investors and those who would look to come to visit us.

Tourism and Sport: Economic Potential

T5. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for the Economy, after admitting that she had stolen his original question, which was about the Irish Open at Ballymena, whether she sees the potential for tourism and sport to work together for the future of the Northern Ireland economy, given that tourism is an essential, growing and significant part of the economy, with sport having played a great part in developing that offering. (AQT 445/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. From talking to members of the European Tour and to representatives of the Royal and Ancient who were in Ballymena for the Irish Open, I think that there is a really great future for that combination of tourism and sport to really excel in Northern Ireland. I look forward to Northern Ireland hosting more of these really big events. I think that it is a wonderful opportunity to showcase all that is good about Northern Ireland. My goodness, I am sure that we all saw that Billy O'Kane's cows became an internet sensation during the weekend.

On a serious note, it is really important that we sustain our tourism and hospitality industries right through these very difficult winter months and that, when we look at 2021, we will have new opportunities to invest and build on the tremendous work that tourism and hospitality does and the jobs that it provides in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): You may ask a very brief supplementary question, Mr Newton.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the Minister's words. Can she elaborate on one or two events that she might expect to come on our radar in the future?

Mrs Dodds: Of course, I have been talking to some of those big events. I am not going to make any announcements today, but I think that we have an interesting and exciting pipeline of events that will come to Northern Ireland. In speaking as an MLA for Upper Bann, I cannot resist saying that I am also hugely excited by the new 'Game of Thrones' experience that will be opening in my constituency, which has the potential to create jobs and many more tourists and prosperity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you for that. That concludes questions to the Minister for the Economy. Members should now take their ease while we rotate Ministers in the Chamber. Thank you.

2.45 pm

Education

Schools: Single-use Plastics

1. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the use of single-use plastics in schools. (AQO 776/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for her question. While my Department and the Education

Authority (EA) have taken action over a number of years to reduce the amount of single-use plastic in schools, the current pandemic has had two impacts: no development or progression of any further work has been possible; and it has led to a greater use of disposable products in order to minimise the risk of transmission.

The Education Authority recognises this issue and is conscious of the impact of single-use plastics in the school environment. The measures currently being taken under the Education Restart programme are, I stress, of a temporary and emergency nature. The resources deployed and decisions made in relation to school safety and reduction in the risk of infection are based on the latest ongoing and continuously updated advice from the Northern Ireland Public Health Agency (PHA) to minimise or eliminate the spread of COVID-19 between and within the home and school settings.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his answer. However, he will be aware of the increased plastic pollution that is arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. More face masks, gloves, plastic bottles and food packaging will end up in landfill or dumped in our rivers and seas, all of which will have a devastating impact on our environment, wildlife and marine life. Will the Minister outline what actions the Department will take to reduce the use of single-use plastics and promote the eco-friendly alternatives, given that there are so many?

Mr Weir: As I said, the position is that some action has been taken, and there is engagement with the EA and schools. There is also a role for all of us to play as individuals. There are complications. You mentioned face coverings, for example, and a limited amount can be done directly in connection with how they are disposed of. In the COVID situation, one of the drivers in the increased use of plastics — this is where there is a critical role for parents and families — is that plastics cannot be reused because of the risk of child to child cross-contamination. However, there is an opportunity. Let us take bottled water and its packaging as one example. I encourage parents who are supplying drinks for children to bring into school to use a single receptacle that can be used multiple times by one child. From that point of view, when it comes to what is done directly in schools, it is not always about what the individual does or risks through the multiple use of something; it is about the risk of cross-contamination through something being used by a number of people. Simple steps of that nature can be taken: parents can give their child a single container, and the child can drink what has been supplied in that container as well as reusing it when accessing water at school. I know that many Members and people in other walks of life bring a single container with them, for instance, so that, in an environmental way, they are able to reuse that product. It is about thinking in that intelligent way. Partnership is needed between what happens directly in schools and what parents are able to do themselves.

Mr McGuigan: Further to the answer that the Minister gave to Miss Woods, specifically in relation to COVID, what advice, guidance or instruction will he give to schools to try to reduce the amount of single-use plastic in schools beyond the COVID pandemic?

Mr Weir: A lot of good work has been done already. The EA will continue to engage directly with schools. It is about that level of interaction. Schools are given

a high level of autonomy as to what they do, but there has to be encouragement to find novel solutions. For example, the EA has used competitions, and we, as a Department, have worked with DAERA to highlight the use of plastic and try to reduce it. We want to get that buy-in. It is about schools themselves, or individual pupils through those competitions, taking actions to improve their own environment. The EA also put in place an incentive whereby, if schools can reduce the amount of waste that they produce, that can help to reduce their waste disposal costs. That will then feed directly into the budgets. Everybody knows the extent to which, even in normal times, school budgets tend to get stretched. If we can reduce those costs, we can get a win-win solution for schools.

Mr Durkan: This is pretty appropriate given that my daughter Lily, who is six today, was re-elected onto her school's eco-council yesterday. Further to the Minister's answer to Miss Woods and the particular example that he used of reusable bottles, will the Minister give any consideration to funding schools to provide pupils with said reusable bottles?

Mr Weir: We will certainly look at that within any budgetary constraints. There is an onus on parents as well. Maybe I am slightly distracted by the nightmare vision of another generation of Durkans entering elected politics.

COVID-19: Education Settings

2. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of education settings that have experienced positive COVID-19 cases. (AQO 777/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. We are working with the PHA and the Education Authority to consider how best to provide the information in an accurate and timely way. The information that we have so far is that, over the last month or so, around 180 schools have made a direct enquiry to the PHA. However, that can be misleading because it is spread over a month. It is also the case that an enquiry could be simply about checking when somebody displays symptoms but there is no indication of a positive case. It can be something that is impacting on one pupil or member of staff, or it can be much more wider. So, the figures are potentially a little bit misleading.

We have figures that indicate the levels of school attendance. We are now able to gather those on a weekly basis, which gives us a tracker. Similarly, although it is taken on a slightly different time frame, we also have figures that relate to the number of teachers and education staff who are in. I will be happy to follow up on those issues but, in both cases, the figures suggest a very high level of school attendance. We obviously anticipate a dip given current circumstances. However, it does show that, in Northern Ireland — compared, for instance, to England and Wales, where the figures show that there has been quite a large number of absences — there has been both a very strong and welcome commitment from education staff, who want to be on the front line teaching children directly, and a very strong buy-in to and valuation of education from parents. A small number of children, because of clinical vulnerability, will not be in a position to attend school. However, the figures suggest a very high

level of success in getting children directly into school following resumption.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for his answer. I also thank him for coming to St Joseph's Primary School in Galbally in my constituency last week. They did some very good work with remote learning during lockdown. Potentially, there may be a lot more remote learning if bubbles are isolating or full schools have to close down. A lot of leeway was given to some schools that maybe did not perform as well as St Joseph's in Galbally did with the remote-learning process. We need assurance from the Minister that there will be equity across the board for young people in what they get from their school and in accessing remote learning. As we know, not every family has electronic devices, and some families have a large number of children and maybe only one electronic device.

Mr Weir: The Member raises a number of valid points. A lot of schools rose very successfully to the challenge of remote learning, but it was not uniform. It is difficult to enforce something that is completely uniform. Indeed, sometimes even the approach taken by individual teachers within a school will differ. Two pupils at the same school but in different classes may find that there is not absolute consistency throughout. It also highlights that, while a lot of very intelligent and innovative work was done, remote learning is effectively second best to direct classroom learning, as everybody in the system will concede. That is why the focus has to be on ensuring the maximum amount.

The Member mentioned devices. There has been procurement of devices. We want to find a way in which we can ensure that those are obtained, for instance, where some parents may be a bit shy or nervous about asking for a device.

There is another limitation. I am sure that the Member for Mid Ulster will know of this, as indeed will Members from parts of the west of the Province. Some work has been done on connectivity with BT, for instance, but there will be patches throughout Northern Ireland where, despite the best will in the world — you could have every device in the world — the internet connection is so poor that it does not lend itself to that. In that case, some schools have had to operate by way of paper packs. Again, that is probably one step removed.

There is also a need to ensure that groups are identified for the provision of particular support. For instance, yesterday, I met a group that deals and works with and provides support for children who are visually impaired. There are different challenges there. There will be particular challenges around a number of issues. However, the main aim must be to get the maximum number of children directly into class.

Mr Chambers: I am sure that the Minister shares my concern about the temporary closure of St Comgall's Primary School in Bangor. Can he assure me that his departmental officials are engaging with the school and offering help and advice as required to ensure the continuing welfare of the staff and pupils?

Mr Weir: There has been that case and another case in Saul. In both cases, we will be working alongside the schools. It may be wrong to drill down too much into the detail of individual cases, but, as far as I am aware, both cases do not directly involve the children. In each case, more than one teacher has been directly involved.

That has created an issue of staffing more so than an issue of teaching the children. We are working alongside those schools. I hope, in both cases, to see resumption of full school activity. Both schools are working with the Department and the Education Authority. As both are maintained schools, they are working closely alongside the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) as well. We want to get a resumption of those schools as quickly as possible, certainly before we reach the point of the 14 days. I am hopeful that that will be the case.

It is also the case that, as a result of this, a number of teachers were identified as "close contact". Close contact is clearly defined as principally those who have been within 2 metres for more than 15 minutes. In any school — there may be exceptional circumstances — that may create a situation where a group of individuals are impacted. In some cases, it can even move as far as a part or the whole of a class. It should not impact on the entire school, unless it is a very small one.

Sometimes those schools may take a precautionary measure following advice to, for instance, have a deep clean, which would require the vacancy. However, there should not really be a situation, except on only very rare occasions, where we see an entire school closed for 14 days. That would not really fall within the public health advice that has been given about close contact. We work with schools on their individual circumstances, and whatever is put in place, there will always be some exception that may require a wider solution.

3.00 pm

Mr Muir: My question also relates to St Comgall's Primary School in Bangor. Our first thoughts are with those who have been diagnosed positive with COVID, and we hope that they have a speedy recovery.

I thank the Minister for the clarity that is being given today on the circumstances on this matter. What more can be done to improve communications in order to assuage the anxiety and concern amongst parents, pupils and staff about the situation so that the full 14-day closure can be avoided?

Mr Weir: Sometimes schools will need to take very quick decisions and instantaneous action, and that might mean taking an initial approach that is arguably more precautionary that may then, in the light of whenever things are looked at, be beyond what really is directly required. There is a need for that close coordination between EA, schools and PHA. I know that CCMS, for instance, will also be trying to give a level of reassurance. In the couple of cases that have arisen, the issues have been to do with keyholders and the chain of command. There have been instances where principals had to self-isolate not because they were diagnosed positive, to be fair, but because they were in close contact with somebody who was diagnosed positive.

It is about trying to minimise the level of disruption. It will be a very rare occasion that a large number of pupils will be in the position of having to self-isolate for 14 days. That will happen where there has been direct contact. One of the questions asked is if somebody has been told to self-isolate but has not been diagnosed positive, does their sibling, for instance, have to self-isolate? No, because that

is one further step removed. It is about that precautionary measure for those who have had direct contact.

In the early days, there were sometimes different interpretations of that. It is understandable that schools will quite often take an overly cautious approach in the first instance. That is why we need to work directly where it arises in any school.

Transfer Tests

3. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Education whether any provisions have been made for pupils to take transfer tests in their primary school, in order to maintain COVID-19 bubbles. (AQO 778/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. As he will be aware, my Department does not play a direct role in the administration or operation of the transfer tests, including their location. However, I highlight that, although until 2016 there were memos from the Department saying that primary schools were not to be used for transfer tests, when changes were made in the last Administration, memos were sent out that indicated that there is no bar to prevent any primary school hosting the tests. That remains the position today. It is a matter for the test providers and individual schools. The current arrangements for holding the tests have been agreed between the test providers and the schools that use the results as part of their admissions criteria.

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the test providers and host schools to ensure that appropriate safety and social-distancing measures are put in place in the test centres, wherever the tests are held, and that the Chief Medical Officer and Public Health Authority's advice is followed.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his comments so far. As a point of disclosure, I should say, as you are well aware, that I am a member of a board of governors, and, like another honourable Member here, I have two young daughters in school who are going through a similar process. However, you will be very glad to know that they have no intention whatsoever of ever going into politics, and thank goodness for that.

We are being asked time and time again about maintaining the bubbles and the bubbling principle in our primary schools. Bearing that in mind, I understand that the provision of the Association for Quality Education (AQE) test is not your specific responsibility, but can you indicate whether you think that this is the way that we should approach that matter and that doing it that way provides the impetus between the schools and the examination bodies to maintain the bubbles? That would be welcomed by all schools, all parents and, indeed, by children.

Mr Weir: I would like to see a situation in which we develop to a point where there is common agreement on transfer, but I suspect that is unlikely. The ideal situation is that every child would be able to sit the test in their own primary school. Part of the problem is that the tests are provided by independent bodies, who therefore have control over that. I appreciate that Members have different views on the test, but if we are to do it on a fair and equitable basis it can only be done if we get full buy-in from primary schools. While there are difficulties and additional pressures on children because they are not doing it in their own primary school, it would be a less equitable position

if some children were able to do it in their own primary school and others were not, because that does not create a level playing field.

Whatever people's views on the transfer test, it is largely a competitive process between those sitting the test because they are trying to obtain places in particular schools. If we ended up with a situation in which, for example, 50% of primary schools said they were happy to do it and 50% said they were not, a child sitting the test in their home primary school, and another sitting it in a different place would not provide a level playing field. We have to bear that in mind as well.

Ms Mullan: Minister, following the release of today's Audit Office report calling for an urgent review of special educational needs, would you not be better directing your efforts to children with special education needs, rather than trying to facilitate this unregulated test during a health pandemic?

Mr Weir: Although I suspect it may come up and I may be able to make very brief comments at some stage on the Audit Office report, there is a restriction on what I can say directly about it. The report will be considered at a meeting of the PAC on, I think, 15 or 16 October, and the convention is that comment is not passed ahead of that.

I appreciate that the Member probably comes from a very different angle on selection and transfer tests than I do, but it is not simply an either/or situation. As the Minister, the Department and I will try to do our best to look after children with special educational needs, we will try to look after the broader issue of transfer, and we will look after children in terms of their general school career. There is a very wide spectrum of things that we need to do. It is not a question of concentration on one issue to the exclusion of another. Even for those transferring at P7, there will be those who will do the test and those who will not. Our role, particularly as a Department, will be to try to make sure that that transition and transfer, in what are still going to be very difficult days ahead because of COVID, are done smoothly and effectively. I do not see this as an either/or situation.

Mr Allister: In regard to transfer, will the Minister agree that the best long-term solution is to recommission the test as a Departmental test, and will he follow his heart and his head on that?

Mr Weir: I am glad that the Member can look into both my heart and my head. It is a skill that I am sure he has developed over the years. I think there are two issues about getting agreement on transfer. First, if I as the Minister were simply to go on a solo run and say, "Here is a DE test", I suspect something like that would be very quickly called in by the Executive as a controversial issue.

Secondly, we also need to give people a level of long-term certainty. If we have a situation in which one particular action in terms of a state test is done by one Minister, and then a different Minister, with a very different view, simply cancels that, you would be throwing people between different situations.

Mr Allister: So Sinn Féin rules?

Mr Weir: Sorry, what was that?

Mr Allister: So Sinn Féin rules?

Mr Weir: No, the Member is saying that —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Sorry, just a moment, Minister. If Members wish to ask questions they should rise. Please, no comments from a seated position.

Mr Weir: The Member says that, but we have a power-sharing situation. If, as I heard him say, Sinn Féin had its way, there is no doubt that they would simply have abolished academic selection and transfer tests completely, but the law enables those to take place. It is not a question of entire freedom of manoeuvre.

There is no point in somebody grandstanding on an issue, which then risks it simply being overturned at a later stage. I want to see a situation in which the two transfer test organisations come together and produce a single test. That is something that would ease the burden on parents and students. However, I am also realistic enough to know that getting agreement in the Chamber on selection is unlikely to happen.

COVID-19: Pupils' Mental Health

4. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Education what measures he will put in place to support the mental health of pupils during the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 779/17-22)

Mr Weir: A range of measures is being delivered through the education restart well-being project in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic to support the well-being of staff and pupils. Those include an Education Authority (EA) online portal of resources, which is available to schools with information on supporting learners, leaders and staff; the EA Youth Service "Youth Online" resource where children and young people can access information, advice and support; and a well-being helpline, facilitated by the Educational Psychology Service, which provides support to schools as they respond to a range of needs amongst their pupils.

Subject to business case approval, £5 million of education restart well-being project funding will also be allocated directly to schools very soon. By receiving their own allocation, schools will benefit from having the flexibility to use that money to provide health and well-being support for their pupils and staff and draw down on a range of programmes. I have also recently launched the Engage programme through which £11.2 million has been earmarked to enable all primary and post-primary schools to provide additional teaching support for pupils, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Member will be well aware that in dealing with that issue, there is funding for academic catch-up and for well-being, but in many ways in schools, those are inextricably linked. In addition to that specific COVID-19 support, my Department is also working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, the Health and Social Care Board, the EA and other Government Departments to develop a framework for children and young people's emotional health and well-being in education. That is progressing well and we are working to complete the framework by December 2020.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for that very comprehensive answer and I welcome the additional funding. However, given the impact that COVID has had on our children, how soon can that funding be allocated so that teachers, as first responders, are able to help as quickly as possible?

Mr Weir: I expect it to be signed off very quickly. The business case has been made and the money is there and will be able to be applied. One of the initial elements, from an academic and from a well-being point of view, was that even if everything was ready to run from 1 September, that would probably not have been the most prudent way to spend the money anyway. There will need to be a certain level of individual assessment in schools of where children are. Indeed, it may well be that individual children in a particular class will have reacted differently to COVID, so we cannot just make natural assumptions.

There is no doubt that, as well as the academic catch-up that is needed, many children will have been adversely impacted and we will move to provide that level of support. We are conscious that, according to the business case, we will be able to allocate a specific amount of money directly to schools, which can then decide where the best interventions should be.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I welcome the new and increased funding that he mentioned and the "joined-upness" that he has explained to the House around the issue at hand, which is hugely important and which is growing in our community. In order to ensure that that "joined-upness" works to its maximum, does he agree that it is important that the Department works not just with schools but with specialist community organisations such as Extern, Greater Shankill Alternatives and Integrated Services for Children and Young People's greater Shankill team in my area to allow young people who are working with those organisations to be reached?

Mr Weir: I have already met those organisations and I am happy to meet others that provide direct, front-line support to schools, such as charities and other third-party agencies. As well as the £5 million that has been allocated to education restart, an additional £6.5 million will go into mental health and well-being in schools.

If we are to maximise the value that we get from that, we will need to look at the expertise that can be provided by third-party organisations. They can be part of a cocktail of measures to lever in additional resources. It is also about what is able to be delivered on the ground, because one size will not fit all. The response needed for a six-year-old in one location will be different from that for a 16-year-old in a different location, and, indeed, sometimes different responses will potentially be needed in a single class.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

SEN Failings

T1. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education whether, following yet another profoundly concerning report, he will take the opportunity to apologise to children with special educational needs (SEN) and their families, who his Department and its arm's-length bodies are systemically failing to support. (AQT 451/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is clearly the case that I am very sad to see any child being let down. I welcome the report because it shines a light on what needs to happen. Indeed, there

will be movement fairly soon on the issue of the SEN framework. At the moment, I am restricted by procedure in dealing directly with the detail of the report or, at least, commenting directly on it. It is due to be discussed at a PAC hearing on 15 October, and the protocol is that there should be no comment on the detail of the report ahead of that, so that limits the response that I can give. Collectively, we need to make sure that, as we move forward, the best possible services are provided to all our children, particularly the most vulnerable and those with special educational needs.

Mr Lyttle: A key goal of the Department of Education is to support all children to achieve their potential. Does the Minister not accept that his Department has failed to achieve that goal and is failing children with special educational needs and their families across Northern Ireland?

Mr Weir: As I have indicated to the Member, I will have to wait until we get to the PAC hearing before I can discuss some of the findings in the report. I am not in a position to fully answer the Member, and I am sure that he knows that full well. In trying to advance the issue of special educational needs, a consultation will be launched very shortly on the SEN regulations and framework documents. Given the need for an additional level of support as we move ahead, that can make a change. Can we as a society do better in providing support for those with SEN? Yes, we can, but that may mean that all of us need to make some tough choices in connection with that.

Curriculum: Clarification

T2. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Education to assure the House that we will follow a curriculum here, whether Shakespeare or Heaney, that enriches our young children from all sectors of society, especially because although schools have been reopened for about a month, they are still waiting for full clarification on changes to the curriculum and qualifications, which causes him concern that we are in danger of following the English curriculum, not least an idea of Michael Gove's from many years ago that everybody should study Shakespeare, albeit that Shakespeare was OK, in that he sold a few plays and a few books, but we should not forget that we have Joyce, Wilde, Beckett, Behan and Heaney as examples of curriculum materials that our schools could be using. (AQT 452/17-22)

Mr Weir: To paraphrase Shakespeare, methinks the Member doth protest too much in relation to that. [Laughter.] We are in a position where the CCEA has drawn up advice on examinations and the curriculum, and there has been engagement on that this morning with, for instance, the trade union sector, so we are reaching a fairly close point. I think that, literally as we speak, a group of school principals as stakeholders are being consulted by our officials on what the CCEA has brought forward. That will enable a final position on the curriculum to be brought forward to me later on this week for either agreement, amendment or change. It is an issue that will move on very quickly. It is important that all actions taken be fully to the benefit of all pupils in Northern Ireland. That might mean that we can diverge at times, but we also have to make sure that there is a level of portability with our qualifications. The key element with any of our qualifications is to make sure that no student in Northern

Ireland is disadvantaged. The curriculum will have to reflect some of the changed circumstances that are there, and I hope to be in a position where that becomes very clear very soon.

Mr O'Dowd: I am in danger of misquoting, but I think that it was Beckett who said that education is the lighting of a fire, not the filling of a bucket. I welcome the fact that the Minister is hoping to use materials from across the board. We have our local curriculum that has served our pupils very well. Everything is open to revision and review, but it is important that you, as our Minister, deliver a curriculum that meets the needs of our children.

Mr Weir: I do not disagree with the Member. Maybe we should end there before we start simply quoting literary sources at each other. We have a rich tapestry of literary sources from across various jurisdictions. With regard to the curriculum, the role of any Minister is to set the broad direction and set the parameters for examinations. For example, if there are opportunities to say that, given the current circumstances, there can be a particular relaxation to the way that the courses work to allow for the fact that we cannot expect every student to study the full content of what would have been there in normal years, given the level of disruption. I am also conscious of the detail. We have seen it happen, in various jurisdictions, with Ministers intervening to say, "You should be studying x or y," or a type of Big Brother quality in saying "So-and-so is a preferred writer" or "So-and-so is banned". We are not in the world of banning Boris Pasternak, for instance, as would have happened in the old Soviet Union. There also has to be professional judgement on the detail of what is in the curriculum. The Member did not try to do this when he was Minister. It is not really the role of the Minister to micromanage that but to give a broad opportunity and a wide range of options. The fact that our curriculum is less prescriptive sometimes than others works well in our benefit. You are right that, broadly speaking, the curriculum serves our pupils well in Northern Ireland.

Schools: Major Works Projects

T3. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Education, after thanking him for his letter outlining his Department's engagement with St Joseph's College in South Belfast about its campaign for a new build, whether the protocol for the selection of major works projects to proceed in planning financial year 2020-21 has been released or will the protocol from 2019-2020 be used. (AQT 453/17-22)

Mr Weir: The protocol gives a little bit of flexibility around the exact timing. When there is a new call for major works, I have indicated that that will happen during 2021. That is not prescriptive that it will happen before 1 April 2021, but it will happen during the calendar year of 2021. The sooner we can get that the better. I have indicated that I want to look at the protocol because, while there was an important merit in facilitating where amalgamations were taking place, it did leave others behind; St Joseph is a good example of that. I am sure that everyone can raise schools from their constituencies. One of the problems was that although a large number of schools scored points because of very poor and inadequate physical infrastructure, in some cases, they were overtaken by schools that got points for amalgamation. That is unfair. I have indicated on a number of occasions that I want to look at the protocol, particularly the scoring mechanism for amalgamations.

Either it should not form part of a new call or, alternatively, perhaps its scope could be reduced.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you. Minister, you will be aware that in South Belfast, over the next few years, there will probably be about 800 to 1,000 new homes, primarily in the Castlereagh South area. Where are you around area planning for post-primary provision there?

Mr Weir: Broadly speaking, the area planning process is being stood up again. During the pandemic, we had to look at all aspects within the Department, particularly from a policy point of view and what had to happen immediately. There were also difficulties in simply moving ahead with processes because area planning, by its nature, quite often involves a wide range of consultation and meetings. That was not appropriate during the pandemic. While the pandemic is still very much with us, there is a desire to start to reboot area planning. The wider strategic area planning group is due to have its first reconvened meeting in late October.

It will try to look holistically at the needs of an overall area. That may well lead to development proposals, and those individual proposals, from a legal point of view, would need to be looked at separately by me. There is a limited extent to which I can prejudge particular areas, but it is clear that we need to ensure that what provision there is reflects the broader demographics and needs of young people in the area.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Mr Bradley is not in his place.

Transfer Test: Opt-out Consequences

T5. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Education whether those schools that took the wise and brave decision to opt out of the transfer test this year, including St Columb's College and Thornhill College in Foyle, will be required to go through the development proposal process.
(AQT 455/17-22)

Mr Weir: As a result of correspondence that we have received, the Department has sought legal advice on whether that is necessary, and we are waiting for a final position on that.

Mr Durkan: I am sure that we all look forward to seeing the outcome of that. Does the Minister recognise the potential chaos that the situation would cause for schools and the massive stress it could cause for children?

Mr Weir: I understand that people need to be given as much certainty as possible. Schools have a level of entitlement to decide what methodology they use. Within the bounds of legal authority, they can decide what the selection criteria are and how they order that. Obviously, schools need to operate within the boundaries of legal competence. I do not want to prejudge any legal information that is received. Clearly, that will determine whether that counts as a significant change that would require a development proposal.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women Report

T6. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered how to implement paragraph 86(d) of the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms

of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) report, as required under the Executive Formation etc Act 2019.
(AQT 456/17-22)

Mr Weir: We are working with organisations on the detail of that. I do not have paragraph 86(d) before me, so I will write to the Member with more information. I presume that this is in relation to relationships and sex education (RSE). We tend to differ from other jurisdictions in that we do not try to micromanage what is specifically in the curriculum. Materials will be provided, but schools will have a level of authority, in line with their ethos, on what is in the curriculum. We try to impose on the curriculum as little as possible.

Dr Archibald: Paragraph 86(d) says:

"Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory curriculum component for adolescents, covering early pregnancy prevention and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation".

How does that match up with schools having the ability, under their ethos, to monitor what they teach?

Mr Weir: The point I make is that, in the vast bulk of areas in Northern Ireland, we do not have a compulsory curriculum. We have a range of options that schools can use. I am conscious also that conflict could take place between the legal permissibility of schools and legislation. Obviously, the legislation was passed at Westminster, not by this House. We must bear in mind the level of flexibility that will be there for schools.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up, and I invite Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

3.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Before I move back to the Order Paper, I want to return to the point of order that was made yesterday by Mr Colm Gildernew, who drew my attention to an allegation that Mr Allister had made about him in the Chamber last week. I have since reviewed the Official Report of the debate in question. Mr Allister made an allegation that he then withdrew and apologised after an intervention by Mr Gildernew. It was right that, having made an untrue allegation about Mr Gildernew, Mr Allister should have corrected the record and apologised for that. However, Mr Allister then somewhat undermined his apology by persisting in referring to where Mr Gildernew had been and speculating about whether that was appropriate. For the record, Mr Gildernew has clarified that he was in Dungannon Park for a walk with his family.

It is unacceptable for Members to make incorrect and unsubstantiated allegations about other Members. However, given Mr Allister's subsequent comments, I want to be clear that it is inappropriate and unwise to speculate about Members' conduct and invite inferences to be drawn. I remind Members that, when we have debates, the focus should be on the specific issue under consideration. Debates should not be used as an opportunity for innuendo or unwarranted personal attacks; instead, they should be conducted with good temper, moderation and respect.

That should be a cautionary note to all Members to be careful and clear about their facts before making allegations on the Floor of the Assembly. It also highlights that, if Members get something wrong, apologising with sincerity and moving on is the best and most constructive thing to do. I now consider the matter to be closed.

Executive Committee Business

Fisheries Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Fisheries Bill, as introduced in the House of Lords on 29 January 2020, and consents to the Fisheries Bill being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament. — [Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).]

Dr Aiken: I support the legislative consent motion.

For somebody who has spent an awful lot of his time at sea one of the most dispiriting things over the years has been the diminution of the small and getting smaller Northern Ireland fishing fleet and the number of times that we have seen fishing boats having to be hauled up on a beach and burned because of decommissioning policies led by the common fisheries policy. I readily accept that I would have been a Remainer, but one of the areas that always gave me concern was the common fisheries policy. Indeed, the fact that, under that policy, the majority of productive waters that are left around Europe are in the United Kingdom's exclusive economic zone out to 200 miles from its coast underlines the degree to which other areas in the Mediterranean or off the French and Spanish coasts have been heavily overfished.

The move by those fishing vessels into UK waters over the years has led to a point where close to 60% of the English quota alone is owned by foreign vessels. That demonstrates how badly skewed the common fisheries policy has left things.

Less than three decades ago, it was a proud industry that people were quite happy to become involved in and go to sea with. It was an industry that supported fishing vessel building yards in Portavogie, Ardglass and other places, but they have all gone. The reason that they have gone is the common fisheries policy.

As we look at what is happening with environmental issues and the flow of fish stocks around the United Kingdom, we can see that areas that have not been under the control of Britain have been, particularly where the EU has been involved, overfished. That happened to such a degree that we reached the point where the North Sea, previously one of the largest areas for cod, had been virtually fished out. However, it was not fished out by British fishing vessels; it was fished out by the likes of the Danes despite over 40% of their catch being in British waters. What does that mean for Northern Ireland? It means that an industry that should have been built, developed and grown has shrunk. Many of the families who were involved in fishing left the industry and did so because they saw no future.

One of the things that we can see as we approach the end of the transition period is that, with the end of the common fisheries policy, we can start to think about an appropriate future for the fishing industry. An industry for all the people in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, where people can go back to their traditional skills and manage them effectively. There are some specific issues. We hear an awful lot that, when we leave the common fisheries policy and decide to do away with the London Convention, even though we will have access to the fish, we will not

have access to the market. I have got news for the people in Europe, because everywhere else has been fished out. If the people in Europe want the fish, they will have to get it from the source, which is UK waters. So, there is a future for a United Kingdom fishing industry.

There are other significant issues, and we have heard about the importance of conservation. Only by managing what is, in effect, one of the largest areas of stewardship will we get to the point where fish stocks are being maintained and can be fished sustainably for a considerable period of time so that we can build an industry. We also hear that within the legislative consent motion we do not have issues that address the crews of fishing vessels and the importance of more of our own mariners wanting to go to sea. Quite frankly, that is not the case. As is the case with the Merchant Marine and across all aspects of seafaring, we should be concerned about the welfare of those who want to make their livelihoods by fishing at sea. The fishing associations in Northern Ireland are rightly concerned about that, and the Minister will be taking a very close interest in what we are trying to achieve as the LCM goes through.

We have the opportunity to help rebuild the Northern Ireland fishing industry from a very low level. I never again want to see our fishing vessels being pulled up on the beaches and burned for some form of common fisheries process. I never again want to hear the words, “decommissioning for the fishing industry”. I want to see us building a fishing industry that is sustainable in Northern Ireland, but it has to be done in partnership with the Scots, the Welsh, the English and those fishing boats from the Republic of Ireland that are willing to abide by the rules. The deep seas off the 200-metre line, in which the Irish Government invested a lot for the sake of the fishing vessels from Killybegs, have been fished out. There is nowhere for them to go, except for the United Kingdom’s exclusive economic zone. Therefore, there will have to be a relationship; there will have to be a partnership. However, it has to be a partnership in which people realise that the inequities of the common fisheries policy have been put behind us. More importantly, we need to look to the future. I trust that the Minister, and the Members of this Assembly, will do that.

Mr M Bradley: Mr Speaker, I apologise for not being in my place earlier.

It has been mentioned several times today that members of the Agriculture Committee have expressed disquiet about the lack of scrutiny time available for the LCM and that there are many concerns about it. However, whilst negotiations are ongoing between the EU and the UK, all focus should be on getting the best deal for Northern Ireland.

No legislation will give everything to everybody; that does not exist. This LCM is no different. However, it has been broadly welcomed by the fishing industry, and I fully support its passage through the Assembly today. A failure to agree the LCM would create a great deal of uncertainty for our fishermen. It would mean that we would not be signed up to fisheries objectives — objectives that are vital in maintaining sustainable stocks and vital in seeing those stocks not just maintained but growing in number.

As an island, the sea is at the heart of our culture, well-being and prosperity. Our seas support our daily lives,

providing multiple resources and services, including food fish, shellfish, energy, coastal protection, tourism, leisure and recreation opportunities, physical and mental health benefits, and cultural, heritage and learning experiences. Failure to support the LCM would leave us without the power to make fishing policy and no power to make grant support to the industry or to regulate it. The Bill provides powers for DAERA to introduce schemes of financial assistance for our fishing and agriculture industries in order to improve the marine and aquatic environment that we all consider so precious and to develop them to be even more sustainable. That will replace the European maritime fisheries fund.

It is my understanding that local fishing fleets offer full-time employment to 686 people and part-time employment to a further 168. On 31 December 2020, Northern Ireland leaves the common fisheries policy, and the Bill provides us with a legislative framework to develop new policies. I support the LCM.

Ms S Bradley: As a Member for South Down, I recognise the significance of the LCM for the livelihoods of the many families that rely heavily on the success of the fishing industry and for the economy in Kilkeel and Ardglass.

Those who supported Brexit promised great things. The removal of the common fisheries policy was heralded as a great win that would remove the shackles of European standards and regulations from the industry in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland fishing industry — I refer in particular to the fishing families from Kilkeel and Ardglass — was promised a new dawn. Mr Harvey repeated that promise here today and presented the LCM as the launch of that new dawn. Well, if it is, I have to say: what a damp squib — or squid, in this instance.

There was no opportunity to consider the LCM at Committee, and there was zero opportunity to consider any amendments. Indeed, this first step involves the Department setting off on the back foot, with promises already of supplementary legislative consent motions. The first step into this new dawn appears more like a Department that has been tripped and pushed into an action. A Tory Government that have repeatedly put their needs first, regardless of the consequences for this place and its people, appear to be forcing the Department’s unprepared hand — hence the need at the outset to speak of supplementary work.

3.45 pm

On 31 December 2020, the UK will no longer be part of the common fisheries policy, if there is no trade deal. The LCM proposes a legislative framework that will fill that void; I recognise that. It is a framework that rejects the House of Lords’ notion that sustainability should be a key driver in building any UK policy. It often jars with me that the fishing industry is presented as a community that cares nothing for environmental protection and the preservation of their industry: nothing is further from the truth. Fishing families in Kilkeel and Ardglass go back for generations, and there is nobody more invested in ensuring that the industry is sustainable for the generations to come. That is why they deserve and need so much more than an LCM or a framework that gives no acknowledgement to their needs. It is a further framework of promises.

Our local fishing industry requires a reputable set of standards, a guarantee that they will not be set aside to facilitate other regions of the UK and an assurance that their catch and produce has access to a market that will command a fair price. The lack of process in the delivery of the LCM and the obvious lack of any such assurances in its contents do not fill me with any confidence. I am not sure that I can yet see the new dawn that has been promised. For the sake of constituents in South Down who are heavily reliant on the success of the outworkings at Westminster and this LCM, I genuinely put myself forward to say, "I hope you prove me wrong".

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the opportunity to say a few words in the debate not least as a Member for Strangford, home to Portavogie, one of our three fishing villages. Portavogie is home to the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation (NIFPO). I was keen to hear what NIFPO thought of this legislation. It is interesting to note that their basic response was, "It was fine until the politicians got their hands on it". However, I think that they are broadly content, although they have submitted some technical reservations to the Committee.

I am happy to support the LCM, despite the uncertainties that have been well articulated by the likes of Patsy McGlone and Matthew O'Toole. Probably "uncertainty" is the word that sums up the reaction of the fishing fleet in the four years since the Brexit vote. We recognise that the fishing fleet felt that they could be the poster boys, as they put it, of Brexit. The UK Government, faced with a country that had divided pretty much down the middle in the referendum, needed evidence that Brexit was a good thing and needed a quick win. The obvious quick win was a fishing fleet that, freed, as they saw it, from the shackles of the European Union's despised common fisheries policy, would thrive and flourish in an obvious way and in a short timescale. Of course, that has not happened.

There have been further obstacles such as the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), which adversely impacted on the ability to attract foreign nationals to the workforce by refusing to acknowledge trawlermen as skilled workers. That was despite the fact that, a couple of years ago, MAC acknowledged in a survey that 53% of the workforce in the fishing fleet in Northern Ireland was made up of non-UK nationals. How delightful to be able to acknowledge that, today, MAC has changed its mind. The Migration Advisory Committee has said today that it now recognises that trawlermen are skilled workers and acknowledged that the fishing fleet workforce should go on the shortage occupation list. I spoke to Harry Wick, the chief executive of NIFPO, and, to use a colloquial expression, today you could not annoy him. He feels that that unlocks huge potential for the fishing fleet.

I welcome the Bill. I welcome the fact that it has the eight objectives outlined by the Minister in his opening remarks. There should be no hierarchy within those objectives. The people who man our fleet are responsible fishermen who understand the importance of sustainability and will work with that while trying to grow their industry. I also welcome the commitment to statements that should tell us how the fleet should interpret those eight objectives and how it is expected to implement them.

We have objectives and a commitment to a statement, but we must acknowledge that there should be an overall purpose to the Bill, which should be to make fishing and

the fishing fleet more attractive to the people of Northern Ireland, who used to populate it but have found that it has become less attractive in recent years. We have to deal with the uncertainty, implement the objectives and come out with the statements, and I hope that the Department will work with the industry on the co-design and co-production of how we implement the Bill if it goes through on today's LCM. Surely, nobody knows how to grow the industry better than the people who run it in a responsible manner that looks to a bright future.

Ms Bailey: The Green Party welcomes the Bill as framework legislation that presents us with a tangible opportunity to do things differently in fishery management at the very time when our seas are under more pressure than at any other time in human history. I thank the Minister for his notification of the UK Government's proposed amendments to the Bill, and I look forward to DAERA being able to work towards making the Bill better for Northern Ireland, should those amendments pass. I also welcome the real environmental ambition in the Bill and truly hope that we use the opportunity to put sustainability first as a means to drive ocean recovery and resilient and thriving coastal communities. I also thank the Chair of the AERA Committee for the comprehensive report that he gave on behalf of our Committee.

I speak on behalf of the Green Party, specifically about the need for sustainability to be enshrined as a primary objective in the Bill and for accurate and robust monitoring and enforcement. For all the potential that the Bill holds to create truly meaningful change to the way in which we manage our fisheries, one thing is clear to me, and it is vital that we get it right: our seas and oceans are sick. They have absorbed the bulk of the warming that has resulted from climate change. We have seen them becoming more acidic and less oxygen-rich. We are witnessing in real time the first death of an ecosystem caused by climate change, with mass coral-reef bleaching occurring around the world and reports indicating that there could be more microplastics than zooplankton in our oceans.

Locally, we are doing no better. According to the UK marine strategy, the UK is failing on 11 out of 15 indicators of marine health. Only 58% to 68% of our fish stocks are fished at sustainable levels, with our quotas consistently being set above scientifically recommended sustainable levels year after year. Less than 1% of fishing trips are currently monitored at sea, making it impossible for us to get an accurate picture of exactly how much fish we currently take out of the seas. We know that our fishing stocks are not secure. UK waters are among the most heavily exploited in the world. The UN intergovernmental panel report on biodiversity indicates that commercial fishing has been the biggest cause of marine biodiversity loss globally in the last 50 years. Overfishing also prevents us from tackling climate change because it damages crucial marine habitats that store carbon and distribute food chains throughout the ecosystem.

I welcome the inclusion of the fisheries objectives in the Bill. It is encouraging to see the inclusion of ones such as the sustainability objective, the precautionary objective and the ecosystem objective. I particularly welcome the inclusion of the climate change objective, obviously, given the current climate emergency and the role that ocean recovery has to play in tackling that problem. It

is, however, regrettable and somewhat alarming that the UK Government have stripped out the House of Lords amendment that would have made sustainability the prime objective in the Bill. That amendment had been supported by a coalition of environmental NGOs and major retailers, and it had cross-party support in the House of Lords. If the Bill is truly to create a sustainable fishing industry and marine environment, sustainability must be enshrined in law. I note, however, that there is no legal obligation to achieve any of the Bill's objectives. Without legal duty, I worry that the Bill will fail to deliver on its ambition. Boris Johnson's Conservative Government promised in their 2019 manifesto that they would deliver a "legal commitment to fish sustainably" — there is another Boris quote for you — yet the same Government have now taken active steps to remove sustainability as the prime objective in the Bill. If that is an indication of the direction of travel post Brexit, it does not inspire confidence, if there ever was confidence to be had in this UK Government. The Bill is ambitious: that much is clear and very welcome. To achieve that ambition, however, the sustainability objective must be in place as the prime objective; otherwise, the wide range of opt-out provisions in the Bill is set to allow trade-off objectives, with the potential for short-term economic or political decisions that lead to overfishing and to a long-term decline in fish stocks.

The accurate recording of catches is vital to managing our fishing activities and to ensuring the favourable conservation status of fish stocks. I was therefore disappointed to see the Public Bill Committee yet again tabling amendments to remove cross-party House of Lords amendments and taking away the amendment that would have ensured that remote electronic monitoring was rolled out for all vessels fishing in UK waters, despite the benefits that that would entail. REM is a robust and cost-effective tool for supporting sustainable fisheries management. As it stands, less than 1% of activity at sea is monitored. The benefits would be numerous: helping to end overfishing through better monitoring; improved stock assessments; the setting of quotas in line with scientific advice; and the provision of valuable data on the capture of marine wildlife such as seabirds and dolphins, essential to achieving the ecosystem objective.

The House of Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee has recommended that urgent steps be taken to put in place robust mechanisms to monitor and enforce compliance. It has stated that REM is the only way in which to monitor compliance with the landing obligation. It is only natural for crew on vessels to be concerned about how that would affect their privacy, so it should be pointed out that REM with CCTV would be triggered by motion sensors on gear when catch is landed, as opposed to being 24/7, and that there would be no monitoring in any living quarters. I should also point out that CCTV is mandatory in abattoirs across the UK. REM would ensure that our fisheries sector too is monitored to ensure robust enforcement and fully documented catches. I take the opportunity to call on the Minister to consult on the roll-out of REM with CCTV across the NI fleet.

We have heard much about the failures of the quotas designated under the common fisheries policy and of that inflexible system. Whereas the majority of UK fishing boats are small-scale, the small-scale fleets hold only 2% of the UK quota. I hope that the Bill provides the opportunity to rectify that and to produce more equitable

systems. We know that coastal communities have lost out on employment and investment as a result of the lack of access to fishing opportunities. We urgently need to reform and rebalance fishing rights so that smaller, more sustainable vessels get their fair share of the quota and so that fishing can be a viable way for families and communities to make a living.

We know that fisheries management plans will set out how we are to achieve sustainable fish stocks.

Among the issues with the common fisheries policy are its inflexible approach and its inability to take local context and environments into account. Those concerns are keenly felt by many fishing communities. That is why I am pleased to see that DEFRA has confirmed that it plans to amend the Fisheries Bill to allow Northern Ireland to have jurisdiction over management measures in our offshore waters so that the specific needs of our local marine environment can be addressed.

4.00 pm

Marine protected areas are intended to safeguard vital marine ecosystems and create a healthy marine environment. A well-managed network of MPAs will align with objectives to ensure that our fisheries are managed sustainably. I am calling upon the Minister to introduce robust management plans for all designated marine protected areas to ensure the long-term survival of habitats and species.

In conclusion, although proper time to scrutinise the Bill has been missing, as has been pointed out —

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bailey: Certainly.

Mr O'Toole: The Member mentioned marine protection, which will include protection in inland waterways, aquaculture and sea loughs. Clearly, there is a huge issue there in relation to our two big sea loughs — Lough Foyle and Carlingford lough, a cross-border lough. Is the Member concerned that the lack of reference to the Ireland protocol in the Bill creates uncertainty around how EU regulations are applied and the quality of regulation and conservation in those places?

Ms Bailey: I am very concerned about the moves from the UK Government. For a way forward on an all-island basis, we need to be pushing, with the North/South Ministerial Council, the common frameworks across the island to build better relationships. That is something that can be done quickly, and should be done immediately. The Member raises many issues. Thank you.

If we are to have a fishing industry in the future, the Bill should have environmental protections at its heart. It is vital that the sustainability principle is made the prime objective of the Bill and that REM is introduced as an affordable, reliable way to monitor catches if we are truly to put sustainability at the heart of our fishing policy going forward. I hope to see those amendments returned to the Bill as it completes its journey through the Commons and the Lords.

As we head towards the end of the transition period, we await a much-needed deal with Europe. The EU is the main market for what our fishers catch, and the prospect of having no access is worrying. It threatens jobs, incomes

and communities that are already under stress. Our fishermen need a deal, and they need it now as a matter of urgency. The Green Party is happy to support the LCM, and we look forward to a robust Bill that tackles the needs of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I call on the Minister Edwin Poots to conclude and give a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Poots: I am glad to respond to the debate, and I thank Members for participating in it. The Chairman spoke at length. He started off with issues around the Bill being rushed and the lack of time in which to consider it. Unfortunately, that was unavoidable. We have done our best, in a very short time, to get this done before the end of transition to provide the Committee with as much time as possible in the circumstances. Thankfully, the industry has expressed support for the Bill, as Mr Nesbitt pointed out. It is interesting to note that the industry supports it, but a number of Members opposite — Members who, apparently, represent fishing areas, and some who come from fishing areas — do not support it. Interestingly, they do not support the industry on this issue.

It was suggested by Mr McAleer that the Bill lacked detail. It is a framework Bill; it gives us enabling powers. Enabling powers allow us to develop issues. Ms Bailey has just pointed out issues that she would like to see developed. She is right. That is how you do it. You take the framework Bill, and you build upon it. Ms Bailey and others can make their argument for how things could be developed going forward.

The interesting thing is that we, the House — the Members behind me and the Members in front of me — will have the opportunity to make those decisions. Previously, we had no role to play, because it was all done over in Brussels. We had one MEP, Sinn Féin had one MEP, the Ulster Unionists had one MEP and the SDLP did not have any. A great influence you would have there, amongst 800 MEPs. You can actually make the decisions on behalf of your own people, and you are saying, "Oh, no, no. We don't want it. This is a terrible Bill".

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Sure.

Mr Storey: On that, I was interested to hear what Clare Bailey said and the point that she made very well in relation to the overfishing of the stocks. That happened during our time in the European Union. Who was it that was coming in and pillaging our fish stocks? The very same people who we are glad to say goodbye to in the European Parliament, who wanted to have our fish and to have it on their terms. The Minister is absolutely right that, from now on, it should be on our terms.

Mr Poots: The Bill allows us to deal with the marine environment. It allows us to actually deal with the fish quotas and the new rules and the future funding. Without the Bill, we do not have any of that.

I heard some Members complaining that it gives the Secretary of State too much power over quotas. How was it done before? I remember, when the deputy First Minister was the Agriculture Minister, she used to head off to Brussels in December, just before Christmas. It was not a shopping exercise — more of a fishing exercise. She went over to Brussels to try to get a bit of quota for our fishermen. In December every year, there was a haggling

session over fishing. It was supposed to be about science. Let me say that science might have been applied at the start of the process, but I think that, by the end of it, there was not much science applied. There was a haggling session every year, and our Ministers from the UK Government were over fighting the case for us. I think that we stand a better chance of dealing with Brandon Lewis than dealing with that.

Members have said that there will not be much more fishing opportunity in the Irish Sea, and they have tried to quote officials. I think that, if they were quoting officials right, they would be saying that there will not be as much opportunity to expand in the Irish Sea as there will be in the North Sea and other parts of British waters. Nonetheless, they gave France the opportunity to take 20% of the nephrops in our waters — France?! It has a huge boundary of water around it for fishing purposes, but here they are allowed up into the Irish Sea. Why? Because France are powerful negotiators in the European Union. Then they will not let us catch cod. Every year, they tell us, "Oh, the cod stocks haven't recovered. Oh, you can't catch any cod in the Irish Sea, because the cod stocks are terrible." Cod is a fish that is commonly eaten here and commonly used here and which used to be caught by our fishermen for our people. What do they do? The cod actually migrate down the Irish Sea from north to south, and we cannot catch them, but the French and Spanish super-trawlers are waiting at the bottom of the Celtic Sea, and they are catching all the cod.

Nobody need tell me that our leaving the European Union is a terrible thing for fisheries. If anyone had driven round the fishing harbours during the time of the Brexit referendum, they could not have failed to notice the numbers of fishing boats that actually had flags up supporting the leaving of the European Union. If you want to see an industry that has been destroyed as a consequence of European Union regulation, fishing is the best example of it. Go to Ardglass, Portavogie and, to a lesser extent, Kilkeel and see the wooden boats with the flaking paint or the rusting steel boats. It is not a pleasant sight. It is not because those people are not prepared to work hard; they are. It is not because those people were not prepared to go out to sea and catch the fish and bring it in and land it and do all that needs to be done. They were prepared to do it, but they were not allowed to do it. Our fishing industry has been emasculated by the common fisheries policy. People who suggest otherwise should be ashamed of themselves.

Mr McGlone, for example, said that we did not have a very good record when it came to the science. How dare he? I wish that he were here. How dare he say that we do not have a good record? We have abided by what has been imposed upon us. That is why our fishing industry has been on its knees whilst France, Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark, with their super-trawlers the size of football pitches, have been pillaging the seas. Our small 10-metre boats have been bringing in very modest amounts of fish, and observing the science that is there.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for giving way. Are we getting a guarantee from him that he will set the legislation to ensure that overfishing does not happen in our waters in the future and that quotas will be set by scientific evidence?

Mr Poots: The good news for Ms Bailey is that there is an adequacy of fish in the Irish Sea for all the communities who fish in it. For people in the west of Scotland and England, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the Isle of Man and Wales, there is an adequacy of fish to go after without overfishing. Therefore, we do not need to give 20% of our nephrops stocks to France. There is a significant uplift to be had without overfishing, which will benefit our fishermen in a very substantial and significant way. We need to take account of that.

I will add that the sustainability objective has to be paramount. We need to protect the environment. Several objectives relate to that; the sustainability, ecosystem and precautionary objectives, which I mentioned. Those are three of the eight priorities that we have set, which all relate to the environment. We want to ensure that we have the right balance and there is not the complete hierarchy of one objective, but sustainability is critical to our role.

Mr Blair also mentioned remote electronic monitoring, as did Ms Bailey. I agree that it has a place in fisheries management. It is just one tool. It could be a tad draconian to impose it on all vessels, particularly those that are under 10 metres. Therefore, it is important that we have that devolved flexibility to choose from the range of management tools and measures, and pick those that are best suited to our fleet. Let us not just say that remote monitoring is out — it is not; it is something for us to consider — but it is for us to consider with a series of other tools and work with the fishing community, who are responsible custodians of the seas and have been over the years.

Philip McGuigan referred to the film ‘Salem’s Lot’. If he wants to refer to films, he could have referred to “the EU chainsaw massacre” on our fishing ports, because it has absolutely destroyed our fishing industry. I have to say that I was stunned that Ms Ennis, in particular, was so robust against the Bill because the consequence of not approving the LCM will be that there is no funding to support fishing communities in 2021. We will not be able to provide that support, grant aid or licensing. Therefore, what do we do? What is Ms Ennis’s policy? If we do not approve the LCM, how will she support the fishing industry? I am happy to give way to her if she wants to tell us how she will support the people in Ardglass and Kilkeel in her constituency. I am supporting them here by supporting the Bill. She is not supporting them by going against it.

Ms Ennis: Show us the money.

Mr Poots: As I said, I will give way. I will hear the Member if she has a better idea or proposal. However, just to oppose it is actually to damage the communities that she purports to represent.

As I said, we have powers now through the Bill to designate MPAs in our offshore zone. That policy would be to the good of the environment. The Secretary of State has agreed to work with us to amend the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. It is not within the scope of the Bill to do that.

However, the Bill will open up the opportunities. We have established our own Bill team to review our own Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 and we will be working with DEFRA to gain those powers. It is important to demonstrate that this is not all about the economy. There is a big environmental impact, for the good, as a consequence of supporting this Bill.

4.15 pm

In terms of the suggestion that the Secretary of State has too much power, I reiterate that he does not have any more power than the EU, yet those who were objecting were happy for the EU to have those powers. We are benefiting today from having issues devolved to us, not all issues, but a considerable amount of issues devolved to us.

There was a complaint, “Oh no, the Secretary of State has too much power”. He does not have the power that the European Union had. Therefore, that objection does not have any standing. We want to preserve our devolved responsibilities. For years, we have successfully been working in partnership with the Secretary of State, Scotland, Wales and fisheries. There is no reason why that successful partnership cannot continue.

Mr O’Toole, and I am glad that he has returned, complained about the lack of detail in the Bill. As I explained, it is a framework Bill that gives us the power to develop the detail. For example, the detailed policies about fishery statements and future funding regimes will be subject to full consultation with the Committee. That will be a decision for us and the detail will be a decision for us, the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland: it will not be a decision for some civil servant in the European Union. That is something to be welcomed.

Mr O’Toole referred to migrant labour; he knows full well that that is a reserved matter. It is not a policy for this Bill. It is an entirely different matter. I thank Mr Nesbitt for bringing the information on the MAC to the House. That is positive news and will be appreciated by all in the fishing fleet.

In terms of the voisinage agreement, I appreciate the valuable instrument that it has been for fleets here and in the Republic of Ireland. However, shortly after becoming Minister, I mentioned the issue of us fishing in Irish waters and Irish boats fishing in our waters, to the Foreign Minister Mr Coveney. His reply was, “I cannot do business with you on this. It has to be done through the European Union”. It has to be done through the European Union, a sovereign state. Sorry, I do not have the power to talk to this devolved Administration Minister about doing a reciprocal arrangement that has existed for years and ensuring —

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: — yes, I will in a moment — that the Irish fishing fleet can continue to fish in our waters and that our people can still go down to Dundalk Bay. Mr Coveney cannot do anything on that because he does not have the power to do that. He has given that power to the European Union and we are getting that power back.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed. Bearing in mind what the Speaker said earlier on the importance of accuracy, maybe the next time that you are talking to Mr Coveney you may want to point to the fact that, under international law, the fishing zone of between three to six miles is the exclusive preserve of the sovereign state. Mr Coveney was either being inaccurate or did not understand the fishing rules, which is probably more appropriate.

Mr Poots: That would probably be a long conversation. I will maybe leave that for you to have with him, Mr Aiken.

Mr O'Toole claims that the Bill is silent on aquaculture. Unfortunately, he has demonstrated that he has not looked at the Bill very closely. If he had, he would not have suggested anything like that because the Bill mentions aquaculture no less than 90 times. The objectives and other provisions of the Bill also relate to aquaculture where specified. The Bill does provide powers for the Administrations to introduce schemes of financial assistance for fish and aquaculture industries, and it includes provisions related to fish, health and diseases that specifically relate to aquaculture. Aquaculture is well covered within the Bill.

I welcome Mr Aiken's comments. They were thoughtful and helpful, and I appreciate that. A series of Members made supportive comments. Mr Harvey, Mr Bradley, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Barton, Ms Bailey and Mr Blair responded in a very positive way.

Without this Bill, we will not have the suite of legislation and the appropriate powers to support the industry via grants post 1 January 2021. That will put our industry at a competitive disadvantages to that in the rest of the UK and the EU. I ask Members to think very carefully and to reflect upon that. I have spoken very clearly and directly to Ms Ennis, for example. Is that where she wants to be in the representation of the people in her constituency? I certainly would not want to be in the position where I would not have the ability or facility to provide that necessary support because I had voted for a political reason.

Mr McAleer: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Yes.

Mr McAleer: On the question of support, the Minister will accept that, between 2014 and 2020, the fishing industry here in the North benefited from the EMFF to the tune of £18 million. He will also accept that the Bill includes no reference to funding at all. In fact, in the White Paper and in leading up to the Bill the British Government made reference to the industry taking shared responsibility and making a greater contribution to the costs. That suggests to me that we are coming out of the CFP, which provided funding under the EMFF, and the British Government really have no intention of putting funding towards fishing at all, yet we sell 86% of our fishing stock away from the North of Ireland, with over 40% going to the EU. There is a focus on support, but I am not convinced that that support is going to be there.

Mr Poots: The Member knows full well that funding would not be part of the Bill. We have requested at least the same money as we received previously under the EMFF.

I will make this very clear in the House, and I hope that it goes back to Europe. The notion that some people have put forward from the European Union negotiating side, that there should be a tariff put on fish caught in the Irish Sea and landed in this part of Ireland, is entirely wrong, and they need to back off. They need to back off and not be making silly suggestions that fish caught a few miles off our coast and landed here would be subject to tariffs. We are part of the single market as a consequence of the protocol, so what is the issue? As part of the single market, we should have the same ability to sell fish landed here in that single market as anywhere else.

I do not agree with aspects of the protocol; that is very well known, but on that aspect, if they are to be honourable and

do the right thing by Northern Ireland, which they claim to have done for years and want to do going forward, this just will not be an issue. Northern Ireland fish will have full access to the markets in the European Union.

In any event, as Mr Aiken quite rightly pointed out, a lot of the fish stocks are exhausted. The Mediterranean, for example, is heavily populated by tuna. Many of the fish caught in the Irish Sea are not available in other part of the European Union. Therefore, they are desirable. Our nephrops are desirable, not just in the European Union but right around the world, because of the high quality of the material that our fishermen are catching.

I'll tell you what: I will take the chance that I will catch it and sell it, as opposed to standing back and allowing someone else to come in and catch it and sell it when they did not have any right to it in the first place. It is a bit like opening the door of your house, and saying, "Come in and take what you want from the fridge". At some point, you have to say enough is enough.

I am thankful that we are coming out of the common fisheries policy. It was not good for our fishing fleet and it was not good for our fishing industry. This legislative consent motion allows us to move forward. It will allow for a new dawn and a move away from a very dark night that we have spent under the common fisheries policy.

I hope that in a number of years when people take a drive around the coast and go into Ardglass, Portavogie and Kilkeel, they will see harbours that have boats that are modern, well-equipped and safe, and an industry that is thriving as opposed to one that has been allowed to deteriorate under the common fisheries policy.

I commend the Bill. It is the best opportunity for us to move forward. We have no other options. I asked Members that if they had options, to state them, and they were strangely silent. It is easy to criticise something, but in the absence of an alternative, I do not see much merit in that criticism.

I appeal to Members from all sides of the House to support the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Fisheries Bill, as introduced in the House of Lords on 29 January 2020, and consents to the Fisheries Bill being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament.

4.30 pm

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

Committee Business

Standing Order 110

Ms Dillon (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move

Leave out Standing Order 110(1) and insert

“(1) Unless the Assembly previously resolves, Standing Orders 110-116 (‘the temporary provisions’) apply in the period from 31st March 2020 – 31st January 2021.”

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Dillon: On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring this motion to the House today, which proposes amending Standing Order 110 relating to the temporary provisions of Standing Orders 110 to 116. I will briefly provide some background to the motion.

On 25 March 2020, the Committee on Procedures considered and agreed a motion to amend Standing Orders and make urgent changes to usual Assembly procedures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. That came as a result of the Business Committee and the Chairpersons' Liaison Group identifying several solutions to both Assembly business and Committee operations to allow the Assembly to continue to carry out its functions whilst adhering to public health advice and keeping Members and staff here as safe as possible.

On 27 March 2020, the Assembly agreed the Committee motion by way of cross-community support. The agreed motion introduced the temporary provisions of Standing Orders 110 to 116.

Standing Orders 110 to 116 provide for a number of changes to Assembly business. They include provisions for a reduction of Members required in the Chamber in light of current circumstances and the need to socially distance. They also make a new provision for voting by proxy. In particular, they make provision for the number of proxy votes carried out by a Member to be taken into account in the collection of voices that precedes a division.

Importantly, for Committee operations, the temporary provisions provide for enhanced remote working practices. Any member of a Committee, including the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, may attend remotely. They also provide for Committee members to delegate their vote to another member of the Committee, including the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, they provide for a Statutory Committee to make decisions without meeting.

Similar provision is made for Standing Committees, with particular provision made for the Audit Committee, and to maintain, so far as is possible, the existing structures of the Business Committee.

That is a brief overview of the temporary provisions, and that is why the motion has been brought to the House

today. These provisions are temporary and cease to have effect from 30 September, which is tomorrow.

At its first meeting of the session on 17 September 2020, the Committee considered a number of available options. Those were: do nothing and let the provisions cease to have effect, which would be from tomorrow; agree a motion to extend the provisions for a set period and consider any amendments at a later date; or agree to extend the provisions for a set period with amendments.

Given the little time that we had left before the provisions ceased to have effect, the Committee agreed to extend the provisions to 31 January 2021 and to use that time to consider any amendments. I would like to point out that, since these temporary provisions have been in effect, the Committee has kept them under review and has not been made aware of any necessary changes. The Committee will continue to review the provisions if an extension is agreed today.

I am sure that Members will agree that the Assembly and Assembly Committees have been able to continue their very important roles in what has been, and still is, a very challenging period.

Finally, following a request by the Speaker's Office to consider the instances in which proxy voting would be retained on a more permanent basis and how that might be reflected in Standing Orders, the Committee has made a number of initial inquiries. The Committee wrote to all Members and independent Members to seek their views on proxy voting. The Committee also made enquiries of other local legislatures to seek their views and practices. A number of Members have responded, as have other legislatures, and I am pleased to inform the House that the Committee has agreed to include proxy voting in its forward work programme. I hope that that brings the House up to date with the motion.

On behalf of the Committee, I will end my comments by reminding Members that the current temporary provisions cease to have effect after tomorrow. We are still in a very precarious situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is imperative that we as an Assembly do what we can to protect not only ourselves and the staff in the Building but our families when we return home. On behalf of the Committee, I commend the motion to the House.

I will now speak as an MLA and will keep my comments brief. This provision is for a set period until 31 January 2021. That is appropriate, and it should not last indefinitely. We have learned much about what can be done and what is possible. For many years in this place, we were told what was not possible. Finally, we see that, when something affects everybody, suddenly it is all possible. In particular — I am going to say this — it was the men in this place, because I suggested that we could have proxy voting in order to get more young women into the Chamber and to deal with maternity leave and with those who were off on long-term sick leave, which has impacted a number of people in the House. However, that did not affect enough people for serious consideration to be given to the changes that could be made. We now see what can be done and what is possible. I certainly hope that, into the future, we have open minds about how this place can be run.

Ms S Bradley: I take this opportunity to thank the Clerks and the Committee, who very speedily put together these

proposed changes to Standing Orders, which, thankfully, were adopted. I also echo the sentiments shared here today by the Committee Chair, Linda Dillon, that there is much in those changes that is definitely worthy of consideration as we finally — sooner rather than later, hopefully — enter a post-COVID-19 world. It is worth noting that there are not only family-friendly outcomes to the changes to Standing Orders but environmental outcomes. I certainly had to put a lot less diesel or petrol in the car for a significant period. That should not be taken lightly when you multiply that up by the number of Members. We need to set standards for other places.

I welcome the changes and the fact that we will have the opportunity to work through them in Committee via the forward work programme.

Mrs Barton: My comments will be very brief. Mr Deputy Speaker, as you know, we are in unprecedented times. Coronavirus knows no bounds and, unfortunately, appears to be here in a second wave, which is why Standing Order 110 now needs to be amended to allow Committee business to proceed over the coming months.

Initially, the temporary provisions under Standing Order 110 were agreed by the Assembly for a period up to 30 September. Being mindful of the continuing pandemic, it is essential that Standing Order 110 be amended and extended to 31 January 2021. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion.

Mr T Buchanan: I welcome the opportunity to conclude the debate on the motion to amend Standing Orders. I thank everyone who took part in the debate. As outlined, the amendment comes to the House as the current temporary provisions cease from tomorrow, 30 September. The provisions were originally agreed by the Assembly on 27 March. They were introduced not only to keep Assembly business and Committee operations running but to keep everyone safe during the pandemic.

I acknowledge that it has already been placed on record, but I would again like to commend the Business Committee, the Chairpersons' Liaison Group, Legal Services and the officials for reacting so quickly and bringing forward the solutions back in March this year.

Over the last few weeks, we have seen a rise in the number of people being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospital admissions are on the increase and further restrictions have been made to our everyday lives. Therefore, it is important that we make decisions, especially in this Chamber, that will protect life and protect the people.

The motion amends Standing Order 110 to allow the provisions in Standing Orders 110 to 116 to be temporarily extended until January 2021. We all hope, trust and pray that this virus is also only temporary. and that, one day, we will get back to the position where we no longer need to have these temporary provisions in place. It is essential, therefore, that we, as an Assembly, do all that we can to protect one another, to protect the staff and to protect the Building users.

A few people spoke during the debate, and I want to thank them for their support. The Chair of the Committee set out the overview, outlined the reasons for this being brought forward and talked about the things that can be learned. If the pandemic has taught us one thing, it is this:

things can be done in a different way over a very short period. It did not take months to put in place some of the provisions that we are now using for our meetings, for voting arrangements and for all other things in the House. It shows that, where there is a will, there is always a way. Maybe that could apply in a lot of other areas in the House. Where there is a will, there is always a way forward, and we have seen that during this pandemic.

I thank everyone who took part in the debate for their contribution, and I look forward to their support. I trust that the House will support the motion.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

Leave out Standing Order 110(1) and insert

“(1) Unless the Assembly previously resolves, Standing Orders 110-116 (‘the temporary provisions’) apply in the period from 31st March 2020 – 31st January 2021.”

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Members can take their ease before we move to the next item of business, which is the Adjournment debate.

Motion made:

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. —
[Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone).]*

Adjournment

School Estate: Upper Bann

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Mrs Dolores Kelly to raise the matter of the school estate in Upper Bann. The proposer of the topic will have up to 15 minutes.

Mrs D Kelly: I assure my colleagues from Upper Bann and, indeed, my colleague from the Alliance Party that I do not intend to take the full 15 minutes, but I welcome their attendance, and particularly that of the Minister, for the debate. I think that we will all be on the same team in championing the needs of our schools in the Upper Bann constituency.

Fundamentally, we all recognise that, historically, school maintenance and our school estate have been underfunded for several years.

Consequently, we are throwing good money after bad in trying to find solutions when a much greater level of investment is needed. Certainly, patching is not sufficient.

4.45 pm

During this debate, I want to highlight some common threads. In preparing for the debate, I reached out to all the schools in the Upper Bann constituency and examined the responses. I found that there were a number of common themes in those responses. I will begin by taking those and using the examples from the experience of some schools in relation to the particular circumstances that some of them find themselves in.

I will start with the backlog of maintenance. There is a particular worry around trying to apply the measures to mitigate COVID restrictions. I ask the Minister to give an indicative time frame on catching up on some of those minor work schemes that have been agreed but which have not all been followed up on because contractors have been able to come on site. By way of example on the cost of backlog that some schools are experiencing with their assessed needs, Lurgan Model Primary School in the Brownlow area has a £900,000 maintenance backlog. That is just one primary school in the Lurgan area. So, we are not underestimating the challenge that the Education Minister has before him in convincing the Finance Minister to part with some cash to help those schools. An example of a problem is that some schools have no hot water in some of the classrooms. Some of the mobile classrooms, which are quite old, are 20 square metres smaller than the new mobile classrooms that are supplied, and that is another worry for school principals.

I have written recently to the Minister, and hopefully he will have received my call for his assistance and intervention with Tullygally Primary School. The Education Authority occupies one of the buildings. For a number of months now because of lockdown, it has had its staff working from home and has said that they will be working from home for the foreseeable future. The school principal of Tullygally,

Kirsty Andrews, and I have both written to the Education Authority asking for it to vacate the building so that the school would be able to use that building to help with some of the COVID mitigation measures. The Education Authority has refused to do so, so I ask the Minister to take that under consideration. The Minister will also know that development proposals have been put on hold as a consequence of some of the COVID work. Can he give a time frame for when those proposals might reopen?

The Minister will be particularly familiar with the ambition of St John the Baptist's College in Portadown to be able to teach at GCSE level. That development proposal had got through to the Department, and, as I understand it, it was going to the education committee at the Education Authority. However, because there were no meetings, that has been placed on hold, yet parents are canvassing for support from me and other representatives to get some surety around their children's future. That would be of comfort and would enable plans to progress.

Road safety is another recurring theme, both with dropping children off and with collection points. Earlier decisions were made to cut the number of school patrols. Last week, I attended Bridge Integrated Primary School in Banbridge and saw for myself the risks associated with the fact that it is situated in an area where there are a lot of new developments. There are five new housing developments in the immediate vicinity, and more than 418 children now attend that school. The entrance is quite narrow, and parents start to gather a good half hour or more before collection time and there is a build-up of traffic. Some children from P6 upwards want to be a bit more independent and walk home, but they have neither a road crossing nor a school crossing patrol person to assist them.

My colleague Nichola Mallon recently awarded some schools in the constituency funding of £2 million to introduce a 20 mph limit. However, this has to be looked at again, and there must be collaborative working across the two Ministries to look at the particular needs of some schools. Interestingly, in Banbridge, just around the corner, Abercorn Primary School has two crossing patrol people at the bottom of the road, yet one cannot come round the corner to assist at Bridge Integrated Primary School. Maybe the Minister will have an opportunity to examine road safety there.

Other issues include long-running problems with blocked drainage systems, which is a particular problem for St Francis' Primary School in Lurgan, as is traffic management. Millington Primary School in Portadown has a leaking roof. It has been that way for some time and had several repairs over the years, but these have had no real consequence. It needs a new roof. That is the only thing that will help.

During discussions in the Assembly before lockdown, I asked the Minister whether there could be devolved decision-making on some small repairs, such as light bulb replacement, where a school principal could make the decision rather than having to go through a lot of bureaucracy and red tape. Some of this is, I think, about a new way of doing things. It is about greater delegation and devolving the decision-making on small jobs, as opposed to having to apply, two or three people then coming to look, accepting that the bulb has blown and agreeing to replace

it. A bit of common sense is needed when it comes to small-scale repairs.

On safety and security, many schools, as the Minister will know, have quite a role to play in the safeguarding of children and preventing the access of unauthorised adults to the school estate. They must also ensure that younger children, in particular, are safe while on school premises. St Francis' Primary School in Lurgan, for example, which has more than 810 pupils, needs a fob system to be fitted to its entrance and exit doors. The school also has a faulty heating system, which leaks, and mobile classrooms that are 20 square metres smaller than the newer ones provided nowadays.

I think, from my discussions with principals, that there is a disconnect between the Education Authority and some schools when it comes to timely responses, decision-making and turnaround times.

Over the last few months, I have been working with St Ronan's College in Lurgan, for which my colleague John O'Dowd, when Education Minister, announced a new build in 2015. We expected and anticipated that that would be in place and that the school doors would be open for 2019-2020. There has been a lot of toing and froing between the Planning Service and Roads Service. It is interesting, and I am delighted to say that, as a consequence, I believe, of knocking a few heads together, asking a few Assembly questions and having this debate, we will see, by Friday, the concerns being ironed out, and I hope that a recommendation of approval for the new build will go to the October meeting of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. St Ronan's College, being an amalgamation of three former post-primary schools — St Mary's High School, St Paul's Junior High School and St Michael's Grammar School — is, of course, one of the largest post-primary schools. The school is quite an ambitious project, and it is important that we see the new build move forward at pace, not least because young people are currently educated between two sites, which is a nightmare for pupils and, indeed, the management of the school. In addition, it is, I think, fair to say, following a recent meeting with a police superintendent, that policing the site is a security nightmare.

Before I finish, I want to touch on the integrated sector. Portadown Integrated Nursery and Primary School is busting at the seams and does not have a site for a new build, which is its ultimate aim. However, some integrated school principals have said to me that the authority and system under which they work, even for small projects in respect of their budget, is set against them in their trying to get work done. That is a particular concern for them.

These are all stresses. Many people now recognise that teaching is no longer only about imparting knowledge. Teachers have to be the social worker, the policeman, if you like, in the school playground, the budget-maker, the financial decision-maker, the crisis counsellor and all sorts of things. Our teachers need our support to remove some of those stresses and strains to try to get the best educational and learning environment for pupils and students

I will finish here. I had a lot more to say but I know that other Members will want to have their say. I am also interested to hear what the Minister has to say.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We now move to the other Members, each of whom will have around six minutes in which to speak.

Mrs Dodds: I thank my constituency colleague Mrs Kelly for bringing the debate to the Chamber. It is very important, and I speak in it in my capacity as an MLA for Upper Bann.

Like other Members will probably do, I begin by paying tribute to the staff and leadership of schools across Upper Bann for their commitment to providing a first-class education to pupils during this extremely difficult time. Our schools adapted to provide home learning when circumstances dictated, and this has won the gratitude of parents and guardians across Upper Bann.

I would also like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the Education Minister for the work that he has done in collaboration with schools to ensure a safe and timely return to classroom teaching. The importance of ensuring young people's return to school cannot be underestimated. The benefits of classroom learning are well-documented, not just for education but for our young people's health and broader life skills. Returning young people to the classroom was a significant piece of work, and I commend the Minister, teachers, principals and parents for the work that they did together to ensure this. Since taking my seat in the House, I have had the pleasure of engaging with many schools and pupils across Upper Bann, and the return to classroom learning has been very warmly welcomed.

I wish to take this opportunity to raise with the Minister a number of issues around the school estate. Before I do that, I want to put on record my thanks for the number of positive announcements for schools in Upper Bann that have been made in recent weeks, first in relation to nurture units. I am a long-time advocate for this model within our schools. Nurture is a key element of supporting our children and young people to make the best start in life and help to improve their educational outcomes. The Minister's investment of up to £4 million for the creation of new, and maintenance of existing, nurture groups is good news. I was delighted that Carrick Primary School and St Anthony's Primary School in Upper Bann were included among the 15 new nurture units to be created. I am in no doubt that this funding will have a transformative impact for the pupils who will benefit from the service. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an update on the work being carried out to ensure that pupils in Carrick Primary School and St Anthony's Primary School can benefit as soon as possible.

I also want to highlight the recent £40 million announced by the Minister as part of the second call to the school enhancement programme, which is aimed at delivering a modern, fit-for-purpose school estate. The Minister has my thanks for listening to the compelling cases made for Hart Memorial Primary School and Clounagh Junior High School. This will transform the school estate on both sites, bringing much-needed and long-overdue improvements. Since this announcement of funding, I have been working with other schools across Upper Bann to prepare for a possible third call for applications. I encourage the Minister to look carefully at the proposals put to his Department by Donard Special School and Abercorn Primary School in Banbridge, and also the needs of Portadown College.

Those schools provide an amazing education to the young people of the area and continue to provide a vital role in the community. The need for improvements to those schools cannot be overlooked, and I invite the Minister to visit them to see the work that they do.

5.00 pm

I know that the Minister has funding constraints. However, I welcome the proposal for the third call of applications for the school enhancement programme.

I thank the schools and parents who have been in contact with me in recent days. First, Craigavon Senior High School: there can be no doubting the need for investment in Craigavon Senior High School. It is unacceptable for the children attending the senior high school to make do with lesser facilities. The previous proposal in the Education Authority's development plan for the future of the school received a widespread rejection from the local community. As the Lurgan campus of the senior high school is the only non-selective Key Stage 4 school in the Lurgan area, it is vital that an acceptable solution is found, and it is incumbent on the Education Authority to deliver an outcome for the senior high school that commands the support of the local community. The Dickson plan has proved successful in our local community for over 40 years and commands strong community support. I invite the Minister to reaffirm his support for that plan and for parental choice.

Secondly, St Ronan's College: much progress has been made by the school in preparation for its new build. Having spoken with the school principal last week about the issues around planning —

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

Mrs Dodds: I will draw to a conclusion. I am glad that the issue is being sorted out very quickly.

Quality education is vital for our young people, and quality facilities will help to improve their chances of receiving that education. I commend the Member for bringing the debate.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank Dolores Kelly for bringing the debate forward. I declare an interest as the vice chair of the board of governors of Lismore Comprehensive School, and I sit on that school's project board for the new build.

I come at this from an angle of experience of trying to deal with the maintenance backlog and with the new school build programme that is required out there and trying to ensure that, when decisions are made, they come to fruition. I have concerns. This is not a matter solely for the Minister, and it dates back to my time in the Executive. The public sector is far too slow in delivering building programmes across a wide range of issues, and there is a variety of reasons for that. One is that the system feeds itself. I often recall how, after making an announcement in the Chamber about a programme of school builds, I was questioned on it by the Assembly and the Education Committee, and, several months later, I asked for a progress report, only to be told that officials were carrying out a business case to see whether my decision was the right decision. I politely went back and said, "Wait just one second. That is not your purpose. Your purpose is to deliver the decision that I announced to the Assembly". Of course, we need business cases and to make sure that

public funds are properly spent, but the system should not feed itself.

On one occasion, I asked for a copy of the guidance notes on business cases. On a Thursday evening, they arrived in my office: two large, thick folders with guidance on how to deliver a business case. I looked at the folders, and they sat and looked at me for a while [*Laughter.*] I scanned them and came across one word that I went back to the permanent secretary with: "proportionate". That is what it has to be: proportionate to the task, to the announcement made and to the benefit that it will bring to the children, teachers and community to have a new school build. That is where we have to get to. Collectively, as an Executive and in our scrutiny Committees, we have to get to the point where we, as a public-sector body, deliver public-sector projects in a reasonable time.

Mrs Kelly referred to the delay to St Ronan's, which has been unacceptable, and the delay to Lismore, which has also been unacceptable. However, I commend the Department of Education staff, who, in both instances, have worked tirelessly with the schools, and the other agencies, such as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Education Authority, that have also worked tirelessly with the schools to get the projects nearly over the line. I welcome Dolores's comments about heads being knocked together in order to get reports sent around for transport etc. That is a welcome development, and it will help to move the project on.

One of the best developments over recent years in delivering the new school estate — Upper Bann has benefited from it in a number of announcements that the Minister has made recently — is the school enhancement programme, with builds of up to £4 million. If you invest £4 million, especially in a primary school, you have practically built a new school. Four million pounds will deliver a major rebuild for our post-primary schools. I have often encouraged schools that are lobbying for complete new builds to look at the school enhancement programme, because it delivers significant changes to the school estate. As I said, schools across Upper Bann have benefited from it and have seen the difference that it has made for their young people.

I will also mention St John the Baptist Primary School. That is a case where a development proposal benefits not only the local community but the education system and does not require an investment. It is a major school at the minute. It has significant buildings that are not being used. I encourage the Minister to open area planning again and make sure that the relevant EA committees and his own structures are meeting and that decisions start to be made on development proposals, particularly on St John the Baptist Primary School in Portadown.

This is not connected with capital, although capital may be required, but I welcome the announcement of the nurture units. The nurture units are a fantastic development in our education system. During my time at the Department of Education, we were slow at the start in getting them off the ground for a variety of reasons. I think that there was some suspicion of them in officialdom at the time. However, the benefits of the investment in them were seen, and there should be more investment in nurture units. They will deliver long-term changes for our young people.

I want to mention the controlled sector in Lurgan. There are plans to bring three post-primary schools in the Catholic sector in Lurgan together at St Ronan's College. Why was that decision made? It was made because it was dealing with all the children in the Catholic sector. The same decision needs to be made about the controlled sector in Lurgan. A proposal needs to be brought forward that meets the needs of all the children in the controlled sector, and that then has to move to a building programme to meet the needs of all the children in the controlled sector in Lurgan. I am not getting into a debate on selection, but, to date, I have seen proposals that meet the needs of selection. There are ways round that that will meet the needs of everyone. Imagination and leadership need to be shown for the controlled sector in Lurgan.

Minister, as you know and as is our job, we will continue to lobby for the variety of schools that are out there. Whenever you listen to announcements from the British Government and others, you find that capital is available in the time ahead.

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

Mr O'Dowd: I support the Minister in bringing forward proposals that ensure that the public sector builds more quickly and builds more.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for being here. It is nice to be in the Chamber with the five Upper Bann MLAs to talk about something that is important to us all; it really is. I sometimes wish that the five of us could get together. John, you could maybe buy the beer, if you are up for it.

We can all talk about our pet projects, and we all have them, whether we realise it or not. They may be about the controlled sector, the maintained sector, the selective sector and the non-selective sector and the primary and the post-primary sector. There are issues across Upper Bann. Some of them are normal and are issues that you would expect to see as property gets older. Some of them are issues that have been generated when there was no requirement to generate them. The maintenance budget and how it is delivered could be looked at and fixed. I thank Dolores for bringing this forward; I really do. I am glad, and I hope that we all speak with the same voice because what we want is a school estate for Upper Bann that is good for all our pupils no matter their academic ability.

I went to St Ronan's last week and met the principal and some of the governors and some of the teachers. It is an absolutely fantastic school, with 1,600 hundred pupils and 200 staff over two sites. They have had their planning application in since 2018, and we have now got to the stage where we are having to squeeze it in by October because of bats settling in one of the sites that they need to demolish. We should never have got to that last-minute hitch, but I believe that it has been overcome by a degree of pragmatic thinking, in that it will go before the planning committee next month and any outstanding issues and caveats can be added to the planning approval. That is good news for St Ronan's, and I commend them for taking a strong, visionary look at what they were trying to produce for their pupils and for the maintained sector in that area.

Of course, I also know St John the Baptist's College well. I worked closely with Noella when they went through that change of name from Drumcree College to St John the Baptist's, and Noella had a real vision of what she

was trying to achieve. Not being able to develop the development proposals is knocking back the imagination that we want our principals and teachers to have to help our schools. I can say the same about Portadown Integrated Nursery and Primary School, and I can talk about Clounagh Junior High School, the Hart Memorial Primary School and Banbridge Academy.

There are many issues, but you will know, Minister, that I have really hammered the drum about the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School, and you will know that I will not apologise for doing so. I do not think that the children there are being given the service they deserve. There was a critical review of that site in 2016 — four years ago. It has no playing fields, so children wishing to do after-school activities have to be bussed into Portadown. The pupils have to eat their lunch between parked cars — eat their lunch between parked cars. They share some of the facilities with the Southern Regional College, so the kids have to move around that campus escorted by teachers. There is oversupervision. When they go to PT, they have to leave and walk to other facilities dressed in their PT kit. It creates stress, fright and vulnerability for the pupils. It is truly awful, and it needs to be addressed. It can be addressed with some imaginative thinking, while retaining the Dickson plan. If people want the Dickson plan, they can have it and we can retain it, but imaginative thinking can improve the lot of those kids. To leave it for another 12 months just would not be right.

I am a product of a failed education system to a degree. I went to Craigavon Senior High School, the only two-year school in the whole of the United Kingdom. There is no other two-year school in the whole of the United Kingdom. I went to it, and I was disenfranchised when I went there. I did not feel that I had an identity, and I left school at 16 with absolutely no educational qualifications. I do not mention that as a badge of honour; I still do not have them. It is a failing as much on my part as anything else, but part of that is because it was a school for only two years. We need imaginative thinking, but what is going on on the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School is just not right. Those pupils deserve better, and that is done not by destroying a system but by being imaginative in creating something better for them. I hope that we can do that, Minister, and I hope that we can drive that forward. There are solutions there, and the people of Lurgan have brought those solutions forward. What we have to do now is listen to them.

5.15 pm

Mr Buckley: It feels as if I am winding up the debate as the last Member for Upper Bann to speak; I have never spoken in an Adjournment debate before. I thank Dolores Kelly for bringing this important topic to the House.

We can never talk about education enough in this place. It is the cornerstone of constituency life and it is the heartbeat of our constituencies. Whether it is my party colleagues or the representatives of other parties, everybody has the right to champion the needs and aspirations of our young people and, indeed, the requirements of our school estate.

I also thank the Minister for coming along today. As has already been mentioned, there have been some great announcements for Upper Bann in relation to nurture units and the school enhancement programme. The Minister

has seen us through a very difficult time with COVID-19 and we pay tribute to the work that he has done in his engagement with school principals, parents and children as they try to adjust to these very different and surreal times.

I would also like to thank school principals and parents for their resilience throughout COVID-19; that cannot be said enough. Teachers went out of their way to provide education for our young people when, 10 months ago, that would not have seemed possible. They improvised and were innovative in their solutions and we thank them for doing so. It is only right that we come to the Chamber to champion teachers' needs and address some of their concerns. Dolores Kelly has, quite rightly, outlined many of the issues that face the school estate.

I am a proud product of the Upper Bann Dickson plan. I attended Richmount Primary School, Clounagh Junior High School, Craigavon Senior High School and Lurgan College. Many people who look at the system do not understand it when you talk about the plethora of schools that you went to, but I can say, heart in hand, that the Dickson plan was a system of education that I was proud to be part of. There are many thousands of people across the Upper Bann constituency who are playing their part in many walks of life because of the educational provision through the Dickson plan.

The school estate in Upper Bann is vast. There are 66 schools in the constituency with over 24,000 pupils. We know that the problem is not going to be solved overnight. Whether they have held the Education portfolio or not, every Member here understands that there is a difficult balance to be struck in managing the school estate within the realms of a limited capital resource budget. We get that, and we understand it, but that does not stop us from calling out what we see as massive failings in the school estate, which date back over a long period.

There is no doubt that the school estate in Upper Bann is in need of significant investment. It is important for us to point out that there are buildings that are beyond their sell-by date. COVID-19 did a lot to show that to the wider public. Quite rightly, Mrs Kelly outlined some of the challenges, whether in relation to mobile facilities, classroom sizes or toilets. We have seen how unfit those buildings are for their educational purpose and it is to be hoped that, in the days ahead, we can start to address those problems.

It is only right to give some examples, but I know that the Minister will, probably, elaborate on some of them in his remarks. I am thinking in particular of Portadown College and Lurgan Junior High School, which has been talked about in relation to works and new builds since I was at that school 10 years ago. Those plans were knocked out at the gateway stage, but the need for work to be done in those schools is only increasing, whether that is through school enhancement programmes or major capital works; those problems need to be addressed.

Craigavon Senior High School has been mentioned today. Mr Beattie talked about the educational failures of the system, but as somebody who attended that school, I can say that it was a fantastic school, as were its teachers. I can only say that it suited me at that time and I felt that the teachers were best able to cater for my needs so that I could go on and excel after that. I pay tribute to

the teaching staff at Craigavon Senior High School who, throughout hard and uncertain times, whether on the Portadown campus or the Lurgan campus, stuck by their pupils and were always at the forefront in championing their needs.

I also want to think about King's Park Primary and Nursery School. Again, perhaps the Minister might want to make some comments about that school. I go back to Mr O'Dowd's comment about the time taken to make decisions, particularly in relation to resource capital builds in the school system. Those decisions take far too long. We know that the need is there. The need is there from the moment that an initial call is made, so for it to be in the system for six years, seven years or longer is simply not good enough. While the buildings are bad when they are first talked about, they are even worse by the time the pupils who were taught in them leave.

Maybe the Minister will outline when the next major capital call will come. There is no doubt about the serious need for investment in the system, be it major capital investment, school enhancement programmes, minor works or, indeed, the school maintenance budget, as has been mentioned. I know that the Minister understands the issues, and I look forward to working with him and, indeed, colleagues from Upper Bann in trying to address those issues and provide an educational school estate that is fit for purpose and delivers Northern Ireland output that is right at the top.

Mr Lyttle: I thank Dolores Kelly MLA for making use of this Adjournment debate to raise school estate issues in the Upper Bann constituency. It is constructive to get into the detail of some of the issues, particularly those in Upper Bann. However, sadly, we could be having this debate about any constituency across Northern Ireland, demonstrating the scale of the challenge for the school estate across our region. There is, of course, a wide range of issues for schools and education across Northern Ireland at this time: school restart; the health and safety of teaching and non-teaching staff, pupils and parents; the unequal experience of disrupted learning; unequal educational opportunities; educational recovery; mental health and well-being; and SEN provision. As the Department grapples with those challenges, progress on key work streams such as area planning has been suspended. It is vital that we recommence area planning for constituencies such as Upper Bann, which has experienced, as much as any other constituency in Northern Ireland, the consequences of a slow and unacceptably ineffective area planning process. Hopefully, we will hear detail from the Education Minister on how that area planning process will be recommenced.

I would like to mention a number of school settings that have been referenced here today to put them on the Minister's agenda. Tullygally Primary School in Craigavon has been mentioned. It is my understanding that the Education Authority utilises space on the school's premises that, if vacated and released, could potentially enhance the social-distancing arrangements in that school. Craigavon Senior High School, particularly the Lurgan campus, has been mentioned. I was able to meet Councillor Peter Lavery and the Education Authority about that particularly urgent issue. As other Members have stated today, pupils at that site are experiencing an unacceptably unfit-for-purpose school estate, and that must be urgently addressed. It really does beg this

question: why has radical action not been taken before now? We hope that we will hear of a radical plan for that site from the Education Minister.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I neglected to mention this: would you be surprised to learn that, for a number of years, St Anthony's Primary School has been operating a temporary heating system that is now required elsewhere? Perhaps I could also put that on the Minister's radar.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for her intervention. That is an example of the extreme maintenance issues that that school is facing and, indeed, that a number of schools are facing across Upper Bann and Northern Ireland.

Portadown Integrated Primary School has also been mentioned. It is my understanding that the school was given permission by John O'Dowd MLA in 2015 to increase its pupil numbers, going up to two classes in each age group. However, locating a new site for the expanded school is an ongoing challenge. Many of the classrooms are now modular in nature. It is my understanding that a potential site was identified, but that fell through. Perhaps there are opportunities for revisiting some of the previous proposals.

It is my understanding that Bridge Integrated Primary School in Banbridge, which I think Dolores Kelly mentioned, is facing some road safety challenges. There have been requests for the Education Minister to consult with his ministerial colleague in the Department for Infrastructure to see whether some solutions can be found for the site. I know that it was disappointed to miss out on the 20 mph pilot scheme recently, but, hopefully, the project can be revisited for that school.

Finally, I want to mention the situation at St John the Baptist's College in Portadown. Sensibly, the Minister granted temporary permission for the creation of a year 11 cohort at the school, which has meant a great deal to a great many pupils and teaching and non-teaching staff at St John the Baptist. It is vital now that the same urgency is granted to the area planning process and, indeed, that expedited consideration is given to the development proposal for GCSE years at St John the Baptist's College, Portadown. I understand that area planning needs to commence towards the end of October for the development proposal to be released for consultation in time for completion prior to Christmas and to allow GCSE subject choices early in the new year. Any other timescale could create significant challenges, anxiety and distress for the school community, and we hope to hear of urgent action from the Education Minister today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you, Members. The Minister has up to 14 minutes to respond. There is quite a bit there; he might need a lot more time.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I may be looking for a hole in the space-time continuum at this rate. I thank the Member for bringing this to the House, all the Members from Upper Bann and the Chairperson of the Education Committee for raising the issues.

I have a few remarks. It is a sign of the extent to which all Members are committed on these issues. I may well have missed one or two but I identified a total of 25 separate issues. Where possible, in my remarks, I will try to address as many as I can. Unfortunately, maybe not in

as comprehensive a manner as could be in 14 minutes. I will check the Hansard report and if there are issues that I have not been able to cover — I suspect that there will be — I will write to the Upper Bann Members with a direct response.

As Members have indicated, the importance of capital build in its various forms is critical. That is undoubtedly the case. Members have been around different parts of the school estate in Upper Bann, and others in a wider context. If the capacity and resources were available, we could spend three or four times the amount of money that is spent annually on the school estate, and still be on catch up.

Under the major capital investment programme that was initiated in 2012, eight schools in Upper Bann were announced to proceed to design for major capital investment. Three of those projects, Tannaghmore Primary School, St Thérèse's Primary School and St Mary's Primary School in Banbridge have been completed, and those projects have seen an investment of £18.5 million. A further five major projects are progressing: Portadown Integrated Primary School, St Ronan's Primary School, Lismore Comprehensive, King's Park Primary School and St Mary's Primary School in Derrymore. I appreciate that Members raised specific points. If I have time, I hope to come on to some of those. Those five projects between them will involve a total investment of £94 million. The projects at St Ronan's and Lismore are two of the biggest projects on the Department's capital programme. A major works scheme is also progressing at New-Bridge Integrated College through Fresh Start, and the total cost of that scheme is estimated at around £23 million.

Mr O'Dowd mentioned the school enhancement programme, which has been a very successful innovation due to the fact that, in many cases, the best-fit solution for a school is an extension, a new sports hall or a new science block etc. So far, four schools in Upper Bann have received a total investment of about £7 million on the first call. Projects were completed at Millington Primary School, New-Bridge Integrated College, Ceara School and Donard School. A further six schools have been announced to advance in design under the second call. Design teams have been appointed at Presentation Primary School, Lurgan Model Primary School and Lurgan College, and the teams are working with those schools to develop those plans. Carrick Primary School, Hart Memorial Primary School and Clounagh Junior High School are in the early stages of planning.

5.30 pm

There is also the minor works programme. Over the last three years, £10 million has been invested in minor works in Upper Bann. Particular mention has been made of minor works. When the last call was put out for minor works, around 6,000 applications were made. Mrs Kelly raised the question of the backlog, and we are in the position that, of those 6,000, about 600 projects have been completed, and they had to be prioritised.

It was said that in a number of schools, the top priority has been health and safety. There is a downside to that, in a general sense. We live in very different times. When Mrs Kelly and I were at school, that was not the case, though some of the younger Members for Upper Bann may have been at school more recently. There is a necessity for child

protection that would not have been there 40 or 50 years ago, and it is right that that is the case.

I will address a range of issues that have been raised. I will try and go through those as quickly as possible. Area planning is being stood up again. Where there is a range of development projects (DPs) already in progress, they had to be suspended because of consultation issues, around the beginning of April, and because of COVID-19. That was not just because it was difficult to hold consultation at the height of COVID, but also because of departmental and EA staff resources. A range of activities were taking place across both organisations that meant we simply had to prioritise because of COVID. To restart the process, the Department has written to all members of the area planning steering group, the overall strategic body, to propose a meeting on 21 October. It is also the case that, where there is a range of development proposals that I think have a particular priority in terms of timing, I think we will move on those as well. .

At St Ronan's College, considerable progress has been made. I understand that, at a meeting yesterday with planners and DFI Roads, agreement on the remaining issues has now been reached. The project's consulting team are working to provide necessary documentation to enable the planning process to be concluded.

A point was raised about hot water in classrooms. The guidance recommends the use of lukewarm or tepid water and soap. Cold water is also effective. Hand sanitiser is not a substitute for handwashing, and it is important that we get that message across.

In terms of the provision of finance, Executive funding has been made available to schools, and that is working its way through the system.

These points are not necessarily addressed in the order in which they were raised.

Mention was made of delegated decision-making. That is something I am very keen on.

I move on to the introduction of new procurement. Mr O'Dowd raised the issues of procurement and construction. There is a wider challenge there, and we will be working with DOF colleagues on that. This is not simply a schools issue. Clearly, there has to be good value for public money from our processes, but we need to ensure that they work in a timely and proportionate manner.

There will be new procurement processes for maintenance and minor works from April 2021, where greater flexibility will be afforded to head teachers for small-scale repairs. That is about trying to introduce a level of common sense, although, as people have often said, common sense is not all that common.

On the issue of catch-up, a considerable amount of work has started. There was a blip, but there has been a small increase in the overall maintenance budget this year, and that can be channelled in as quickly as possible, and works progressed. I have seen sites where that has been happening.

On road safety, provision can be made in capital programmes for school site traffic management. We have seen that happen, for example at Bridge Integrated Primary School where such works are currently under review. The school crossing patrol is not a matter for us

directly. It is a non-statutory function of the Education Authority. An assessment is always carried out when a school crossing patrol person retires. The EA has criteria for that.

We have to realise that active transport and children walking to school, is, unfortunately, probably more limited than it was. Perhaps the Member who secured the Adjournment debate and I would have gone to school in a horse and cart, but things have moved on since then.

Mention was made of Tullygally Primary School and, coincidentally, I will be there tomorrow, so you are all welcome. I have asked my officials to liaise with the EA, the CCMS and the school to review the current position and provide me with further information on the specific details of that case.

I want to touch on a number of other issues. Mention was made, I think by Mrs Dodds, of the nurture units. It was very good that I was able to initiate those at Carrick Primary School and St Anthony's Primary School, and they have been a considerable success story. It is not simply about the individual nurture units; it is about getting that level of intervention. The aim is to move on those as quickly as possible and, in most cases, I think that they will be in place from the beginning of January. A small number of schools will require a little bit of adaptation, but I do not believe the schools in Upper Bann would necessarily fall into that category.

Mention was also made of Hart Memorial Primary School. Projects were announced in May and work has taken place to advance the design of the scheme. The Education Authority will undertake site visits in October 2020 to discuss the potential scope for those projects and the pre-qualification tender design process for the design teams will commence thereafter. Based on the programmes for the early SEP2 tranches, we are probably looking at construction there in 2024. I do not have details about Clounagh Junior High School.

I think that mention was also made of when there would be a major capital call. The aim is to have that during 2021. The timing is not quite clear. There is a little bit of headroom with whether that will happen in this or the following financial year, but it will certainly be in the 2021 calendar year. In the third call, I think we will always be looking at trying to get a mix and a level of progress that is there in terms of solutions that will get a mix of capital.

Mention was also made of the Dickson plan. Let me make it very clear: I completely support the Dickson plan and want to see it continue. Allied to that, as was mentioned, there is a strong parental choice for the Dickson plan to continue. Therefore, any actions that I would take would never threaten it and would fully support it.

There are a number of specific issues with St John the Baptist School and I think that the flexibility that was given this year was the right decision. The plans for St John the Baptist Primary School and Craigavon Senior High School will, ultimately, come as development proposals, so I am very limited in what I can say directly about them.

Having been there a number of times, I know that the physical infrastructure of the Lurgan campus is simply not acceptable. If the question is, "Why has something not been done up to this point?", in part, that is because there has been a lack of consensus about what the specific

development proposal should be. Ultimately, the actions, in whatever form, will have to flow from the development plan; they will emerge from that. I have to be a little bit cautious on that as I would be the legal authority, but I am fully cognisant of the problems in Lurgan.

I will try to get some details on St Anthony's Primary School's heating system. I do not have those directly to hand.

In January 2020, the Department approved a business case addendum for Lismore Comprehensive School and planning approval is in place. The procurement for development and the build integrated study are well under way and an appointment of contractors is imminent. It is expected that the project will move on-site in April 2021 with a two-year construction period.

Kingspark Primary School Lurgan was also mentioned and the major capital investment project to provide suitable accommodation for a 23-classroom base there is progressing. An integrated consultant team was appointed in October 2019. The team has prepared a draft technical feasibility study on all options, including refurbishment and new build. Following advice from planning officials, the report is being updated for submission to the Department. On approval, that report will form the basis of the business case to determine the —.

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

Mr Weir: I appreciate that there are a number of issues that I have not been able to cover, but I will write to the Upper Bann Members with full details. I thank Members for both the content and the tone of the debate tonight.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you very much indeed for that, Members and Minister. That concludes our business for today.

Adjourned at 5.40 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 5 October 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Derek Mahon

Mr Speaker: Mr Matthew O'Toole has been given leave to make a statement, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24, on the death of Derek Mahon. 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. 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 O'Toole: Mr Speaker, thank you for granting this Matter of the Day to mark the passing of one of Ireland's great poets.

Derek Mahon was the son and grandson of Harland and Wolff shipyard workers. Born and raised in Skegoneill in north Belfast, he and his family later moved to Glengormley. He was schooled at Inst and then Trinity. He belonged to an extraordinary generation of Ulster poets who came of age in the years before the Troubles. Born within a few years of one another were Mahon, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Stewart Parker and Seamus Deane. Mahon, like the others, found a subject in the unique predicament of this place and our history. In 'Camus and Ulster', he wrote of:

*"Our northern land of rain and haze
Our cherished foe".*

In 'In Carrowdore Churchyard', a poem written at the grave of another Ulster poet, Louis MacNeice, he wrote carefully about the ambiguities and complexities of this place. He wrote of what he called a "fragile, solving ambiguity" that poetry could represent. In this Chamber, and in this part of the world, we could all reflect on the fragile but healing quality of ambiguity.

Mahon's own life contained ambiguities. An Ulster Protestant from a working-class background, most of his adult life was lived in the far south of Ireland, specifically in Kinsale. Much of his work is inspired not just by the beauty but by the beautiful banality of places across this island, from Rathlin, to Achill, to, perhaps most memorably, a disused shed in County Wexford, but it would be wrong to pigeonhole this great writer as simply a poet of the North's Troubles or even simply of Ireland. He was a genuinely international figure, as evidenced by the attention paid to his passing all over the world. He lived and wrote in the US and France. He won numerous awards and honours in Ireland and internationally, but this year saw perhaps the greatest honour for any writer of verse: to bring solace and

inspiration to tens or, indeed, hundreds of thousands of people.

Earlier this year, as we faced into the pandemic, his beautiful work 'Everything is Going to be All Right' acted as consolation to people across Ireland and, indeed, around the world. In the weeks to come, we may be in need of some more of that solace.

Mahon wrote:

*"The sun rises in spite of everything
and the far cities are beautiful and bright.
I lie here in a riot of sunlight
watching the day break and the clouds flying.
Everything is going to be all right."*

In passing on our condolences to his partner and his family, let us give thanks that an artist of such profound talent came from this place and used his talent in such a wonderful way.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Christopher Stalford. I welcome you, the Principal Deputy Speaker, back to the House following your recent bout of illness.

Mr Stalford: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I appreciate that. It would be hard to describe Derek Mahon's life as anything other than a life well lived. Speaking as someone who comes from and has lived in the city of Belfast his entire life, I think that we can all be very proud of the contribution that a native son of the city has made to the world of literature.

Derek Mahon came from a similar background to me. He came from a working-class family. His father and grandfather worked in Harland and Wolff shipyard and his mother worked in a linen mill. He was educated at Inst, Trinity and the Sorbonne. He travelled extensively in France, Canada and the United States of America.

He had a lifelong friendship with Michael Longley, whom, as a member of Belfast City Council, and along with Mr O'Toole's predecessor, the now Member of Parliament for South Belfast, I was honoured to nominate for the freedom of the city of Belfast.

Mr Mahon had dozens of collections published, and his contribution to literature can never be overestimated. It is rare to have three biographies of one's self written in one's own lifetime. That has occurred in Mr Mahon's case and is demonstrative of the high esteem in which he is held. My constituency colleague Mr O'Toole made reference to Mr Mahon's poem, 'Everything Is Going To Be All Right'. In the context of the times in which we are living, it is important that we remember those sentiments.

On behalf of my party, I extend our deepest condolences to his family and his many friends at this very sad time.

Ms Ennis: Derek Mahon is arguably one of the finest poets that Ireland has ever produced. A contemporary of Seamus Heaney, as Matthew O'Toole pointed out, his influence on Irish poetry and the literary world is immense. Through these uncertain times, the power of Derek Mahon's words in his famous poem 'Everything Is Going To Be All Right', in the line in which he says:

"The sun rises in spite of everything"

gives comfort to many of us as we face the daunting challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On behalf of the Sinn Féin team, I extend our sincerest sympathies and condolences to the family and friends of Derek Mahon.

Mr Stewart: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I pay tribute to Derek Mahon and send our sympathies and thoughts to his family. As has already been said, Mr Mahon has joined a long list of Ulster greats among writers and poets. It has often been said that he:

"wove together history, personal demons and quiet contemplation in works that could be dark"

but that often, in true Northern Irish fashion, "spoke of renewal" and positivity. He was a leading Irish poet, whose verses could be lyrical, pessimistic, sombre, witty and classically structured but full of contemporary things. Although his passing is tragic, his work will live long in our memories. Our thoughts are with his family at this time.

Mr Blair: All of us who love poetry in Northern Ireland and, indeed, many beyond will be saddened to hear of the death of Derek Mahon, who was one of our great writers. It particularly hits home for those from north Belfast and south Antrim, as his early poem 'Glengormley' originated in the area. It says:

*"By
Necessity, if not choice, I live here too."*

As one who lives there too, on behalf of my Alliance Party colleagues, I extend our deepest sympathies to Derek's partner Sarah, his three children and those across the arts sector, who will of course mourn his passing.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. No further Members wish to speak, so that concludes the Matter of the Day.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Philip McGuigan replace Mr Seán Lynch as a member of the Committee for Finance; that Ms Emma Rogan replace Ms Emma Sheerin as a member of the Audit Committee; and that Mr Seán Lynch replace Mr Colm Gildernew as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [Mr O'Dowd.]

Executive Committee Business

The Pension Protection Fund (Moratorium and Arrangements for Companies in Financial Difficulty) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

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

That the Pension Protection Fund (Moratorium and Arrangements for Companies in Financial Difficulty) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: The rule that we are considering today is, of course, very technical, so it will be helpful to provide a bit of background. The pension protection fund provides compensation for members of eligible occupational pension schemes where the sponsoring employer is insolvent and the scheme has insufficient assets to pay benefits at the fund compensation levels. If a qualifying insolvency event occurs in relation to an employer with a pension scheme eligible for protection by the pension protection fund, the scheme will enter an assessment period to enable the pension protection fund to assess whether or not the scheme is eligible to transfer into the fund. Under pensions law, during the assessment period the rights of trustees or managers of the scheme in relation to any debt due to them by the employer are exercisable by the pension protection fund. In light of COVID-19, the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 made changes to the corporate insolvency regime and created new processes, including a moratorium, which offer breathing space and flexibility to give companies an opportunity to explore rescue options free from creditor action. Under pensions legislation, similar corporate rescue processes are treated as insolvency events. When such an event occurs to an employer with an eligible occupational pension scheme, the pension protection fund assesses the scheme and, amongst other things, takes over the scheme's trustees' or managers' role as a creditor of the sponsoring employer. A moratorium is not included as an insolvency event. Therefore, the normal safeguards within the legislation are not engaged.

These regulations provide specific protection for pension schemes and, by extension, the pension protection fund during a moratorium pursuant to the Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. They provide the pension protection fund with creditors' rights in certain specified circumstances, when a company in a limited liability partnership, relevant cooperative society or community benefit society obtains a moratorium from creditor action under the new process. The regulations ensure that a moratorium does not leave pension schemes and the pension protection fund without appropriate protections in place. They enable the pension protection fund to take on the scheme trustees' or managers' role as a creditor during the period that a moratorium is in force in specified circumstances. However, the scheme trustees or managers are not completely excluded, as it is recognised that they also play an important role in protecting members' interests to provide the appropriate balance. Before the pension protection fund participates in

a decision-making process to the exclusion of the scheme trustees or managers, it is required to consult with them.

As I said from the outset, it is somewhat technical, but I hope that Members appreciate why these regulations are necessary.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee considered this statutory rule at its meeting on 9 September. As the Minister has said, the statutory rule provides specific protection for pension schemes and the pension protection fund during a moratorium in accordance with the Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 1989.

The Pension Protection Fund operates across the UK and provides an important safety net for members of defined benefit schemes. The regulations provide that, during any period in which such a moratorium is enforced, the creditors' rights of the scheme trustees or managers are to be exercised by the Pension Protection Fund in certain circumstances, after consultation with the scheme's trustees or managers.

The Committee notes that the regulations make provision for Northern Ireland corresponding to that already contained in regulations made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in relation to Great Britain. The Committee is content to recommend that the Assembly approve the regulations.

12.15 pm

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for her detailed outline of the regulations before us today and the Committee Chair, Paula Bradley, for the further clarity that she provided. As we have heard, the regulations are highly technical in nature and are necessary as a result of the changes made to the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act. Those changes were made in response to the pandemic. During these uncertain times, it is important that additional measures are put in place to help businesses to stay afloat and protect jobs, and the moratorium is one such measure. It is equally important, however, that that does not negatively impact on current protections for pension schemes and, indeed, the Pension Protection Fund, and the regulations seek to address that issue. I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: As there are no further Members to speak, I call the Minister for Communities, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, to wind up the motion.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Very briefly, I thank the Committee for its support. I think that everyone realises and recognises that the additional protections are necessary, so I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pension Protection Fund (Moratorium and Arrangements for Companies in Financial Difficulty) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two while we change the Table.

Private Members' Business

Victims of Crime Commissioner: Appointment

Mr Beattie: I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees that all victims of crime deserve to receive the same support following a criminal offence being perpetrated against them and during any judicial proceedings; and calls on the Minister of Justice to conduct a feasibility study into the appointment of a victims of crime commissioner who would act as a focal point, champion and advocate and bring forward best practice in dealing with, and supporting, victims of crime.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one and a half hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

Mr Beattie: For every crime, there is a victim. There is no such thing as a victimless crime. Therefore, in our society, we have thousands of victims who suffer physically, mentally and emotionally. They are victims of antisocial behaviour, scams, burglaries, assaults, muggings, fraud, domestic abuse, drink- and drug-driving and murder. Of course, there are underlying reasons for crime: socio-economic reasons such as poverty, disadvantage and disengagement, drug and alcohol abuse, our divided society and mental health issues. Addressing the causes of crime is fundamental to creating fewer victims. I am happy for those to be pointed out during the debate to allow for balance and understanding. However, the motion is about looking at crime through the eyes of the victim. Only through the prism of the victim can we understand what they are going through.

The Assembly will know that I have raised the issue on multiple occasions: on the Floor, in debate, in questions for oral and written answer and at the Justice Committee. The motion is not a vanity project or a hobby horse subject. It has been born out of listening to victims and trying to understand what they are going through as the investigation progresses, as a perpetrator is found or, indeed, not found, in the court case and in what happens next. All those things happen after the crime takes place, and the victim has to deal with them on a rolling basis.

In 2017, I spoke to Charles Little. I know that the Minister has spoken to Charles. His family lost their parents — Michael and Marjorie Cawdery — to a brutal murder carried out by a mental health patient. They are not alone in this. The murderer, Thomas Scott McEntee, was a mental health patient, and the failure to deal with that issue directly led to the murders. From speaking to Charles Little, it was clear that he had to go through a lot of the processes in dealing with the murder of his family members alone. They had to walk the path alone. They had to move out of their home, as it was now a crime scene, and they had no help in moving out.

They had to fight to understand what had happened to their family members and for any information that they could get as to who was responsible. To their credit, they do not hold Mr McEntee solely responsible for the murder of their loved ones.

We can all highlight victims who have not had the support that they deserve. Every one of us could do that, ranging from people who have been burgled to people who have fallen victim to a scam and other issues. Peter Dolan's son Enda, who was just 18 years old, was killed by a drug- and drink-driver. Those were horrific, horrendous circumstances, and many Members have spoken to Peter Dolan and will know that. Peter needed help when his son was killed, and he needed support during the court case. He needed understanding as he fought for a tougher sentence for the perpetrator. He still needs that today; he has not stopped being a victim. The perpetrator will be released after four and a half years behind bars for the killing of Enda, and Mr Dolan will have to deal with that again.

Those are the issues that we need to look at. How do we provide those people with whole-life support? In July this year, the Criminal Justice Inspection released a report on victims and witnesses that highlighted the fact that many victims do not understand their rights and do not know how to access support. There was the obligatory recommendation that the police and the victim and witness care unit need more training. Of course they need more training, because training and development are endless. The report also concluded that there was too much emphasis on process, which hindered meaningful engagement with victims and the impact that the crime was having on them and their families.

A Victim Charter is in place, but who champions it? Who makes sure that it is up to date and fit for purpose? New legislation to support victims of crime and their families was announced in the Queen's Speech in December 2019. That new legislation is being driven forward now by Alex Chalk MP, with the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales promoting the voice of the victim to inform that legislation. Who is doing something similar for Northern Ireland? Who is promoting the voice of the victim at the highest level?

The charity Victim Support NI does a fantastic job — I know that Members will mention it — but it needs support. Who is or could be liaising with Alex Chalk MP about new legislation? Who could be informing the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill from a victims' perspective? I commend the Chair, the Deputy Chair and members of the Justice Committee for the work that they have done in scrutinising the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, which has been truly fantastic. The issue of a domestic abuse commissioner has been raised on multiple occasions. Who could feed into the sentencing review and consultation or the new hate legislation on behalf of victims? The answer is a dedicated victims of crime commissioner whose sole remit is to ensure support for victims of crime. That is their job; that is what they do.

I note that two amendments to the motion were submitted by the Alliance Party and the DUP. I would have been minded to support both amendments, because they added value to the motion and addressed the issue at hand. I hope that the Justice Minister will announce something substantive today and that she is minded to appoint a victims of crime commissioner and possibly link into the legislation going through Westminster, if not in the long term, then certainly in the short term, because the mandate is so short. If she is unable to do that, I hope that an interim commissioner can be appointed until the post

is put on a statutory footing. It is clear that, until we start looking at some of the issues through the eyes of victims, we will continually fail them, if not directly, then indirectly.

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

12.30 pm

The motion is a blunt instrument. It looks at the issue through primary colours; I accept that. There are far more issues to be debated, and I am sure that they will be raised here. I hope that they will be, because we need that balance. All victims of crime, from the lowest level of crime to the highest, need somebody to fight their corner. When something goes wrong or is not right, victims need someone to liaise with the Justice Minister or other agencies to put it right. That is the important part. I hope that the Assembly will join me in supporting the motion. It is not contentious. We all know victims out there. We have all dealt with victims, and we all want to do our best for them. A victims of crime commissioner is the first step in doing that.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for tabling the motion, which we will support. I am disappointed, however, that the motion needed to be tabled, and I will elaborate on that. In 2012, the Justice Committee, which I chaired, launched an inquiry into the experiences of victims and witnesses of the criminal justice system. I might be the only member of that Committee who is still, via some changes on the path, on the Justice Committee today. Raymond McCartney was the Deputy Chairperson at that time, Tom Elliott was an Ulster Unionist representative, Alban Maginness represented the SDLP, and there were other members.

That Committee gathered extensive evidence. I remember being in the north-west, listening to victims talking about their experience and how they had been let down by the criminal justice system. They ranged from family members who had lost loved ones through murder to people who had been impacted by smaller crimes, such as burglary and theft. We heard about the devastating impact that the whole spectrum of crime had on victims. We also heard how they felt let down by the system.

In 2012, that Committee produced a unanimous report that made comprehensive recommendations. Here we are, eight years later, and the issues raised then are being raised today. When Committees produce reports, they are not meant to sit on a shelf. Committees follow up on them, as the Justice Committee did on numerous occasions. Some of those recommendations have been implemented, such as the victim and witness care units. Members went over to Great Britain and saw at first hand how those units worked, and they came online here in Northern Ireland. The latest Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) report highlights that good work is taking place in those units but says that much more could be done.

That Committee also recommended a Victim Charter, which became legislation in 2015. It sets down the legal rights that victims have to be afforded. The CJINI report and investigation found that not one victim of crime to whom it had spoken was aware of the Victim Charter — not one. Yet it is a legal document that enshrines the rights of victims and provides basic information on the way in which they engage with statutory authorities. The report highlights how the PSNI often deals with the charter as a tick-box exercise, which misses the victim behind the process that it follows.

If we are to have a victims-centred criminal justice system, there needs to be change. The House, through the Committee, recommended change. Eight years later, the CJINI report highlights some aspects that are good but others that have failed. That needs to be listened to. Some of the recommendations are about change at leadership level.

The CJINI report makes four strategic recommendations and 12 operational ones. In the strategic ones, it talks about leadership in the Department of Justice. That is where we look to the Minister, as we looked to the previous Minister, David Ford, when producing that report. We worked with him, and good work was done.

We need leadership that is driven at the top. The report recommends that those involved in senior leadership positions in the Department of Justice need to be active members of the victim and witness care unit steering group. To many people, that would seem to make sense, and it should not require a report to make that recommendation. Nevertheless, it does. I would like to hear the Minister commit to having the senior leadership in her Department becoming active members of the steering group and providing oversight. The report highlights how those units can be very beneficial at gathering the right kind of information that can then be extrapolated across the criminal justice system so that real, meaningful change can take place.

That is where we come to the motion. Based on the evidence of 2012, the motion that the Member for Upper Bann has brought now, and the criticism in the CJINI report, I believe that, as a minimum, a feasibility study for a victims of crime commissioner is required. There needs to be accountability, and we need structures put in place to hold Ministers and the Department to account.

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

Mr Givan: The Committee will continue to do that work. I support the motion, because more needs to be done. I thank the Member for proposing it.

Ms Dillon: Much of what has been said by both the proposer of the motion, whom I thank for bringing it to the House, and the Chair of the Committee will probably be repeated across the House. That leads me to think that we possibly should have looked at bringing a Committee motion, as that would carry weight and have value. However, this motion is here and will probably get support across the House. I am sure that it will be carried and, hopefully, the Minister will give a positive response.

Asking for a feasibility study is good, as it shows that you are starting at the right point. Rather than saying, "We need something", it says, "We should look at what we need and, if we need it, what responsibilities should be given to that commissioner". That is extremely important. Obviously, our starting point is that we have to look first at victims — victims right across the board. Over recent months, all of us, including me in my role as Deputy Chair of the Justice Committee, have heard about those who have suffered all the different types of domestic abuse whether it is physical, coercive, sexual or involves children and other family members. All of this is really important in highlighting to us why victims need to be listened to. That is what we need to look to.

As Paul outlined, the report is there; all of the evidence is there. However, there are many reports and recommendations out there. There is the Gillen review and recommendations and many, many others. Maybe we, as a Committee, need to look at what reports and recommendations are there and see what has been implemented and what could actually have an impact, and, in the absence of a victims of crime commissioner, what we can do to ensure that those recommendations are implemented. As a Committee, we have a lot of work to do. Our work is about holding the Minister to account and ensuring that the recommendations made to the Department and to all the other organisations, whether the PSNI or any other, are carried out.

There are a number of different models of victim support and advocacy. We need to look to all of those, what is involved and what they cover. There are models in the South — it has quite an extensive role — and across the water in England and Wales. Scotland has decided not to go with a victims of crime commissioner, but that does not mean that that is the right approach.

The motion is excellent in asking us to look at a feasibility study and all the other models out there. It might be that none of those is the example that we follow; there may be other, better models across the world. We need to look at what is the best model and the best practice. We should not have a narrow view and look just within these islands; we need to look at what is the best model. We should be looking at what is in place in the Twenty-six Counties, England, Wales and Scotland and seeing what is missing and what is wrong there. Whatever we do and whenever we do it, we want it to be better, not the same. That is important for us.

As I have outlined, over recent months we have been scrutinising the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. In it, as Members have said, we have looked at the value of a specific commissioner on domestic abuse. All those issues can be looked at as part of the feasibility study. I do not think that Members would disagree that we need to look at all of that. However, there is an issue of equity here. We need to ensure that all victims have the same representation and are looked after in the same way, regardless of what they are the victim of, whether homicide, domestic or sexual violence, or antisocial behaviour.

What is important is knowing that there is a person there to help you.

Mr Givan mentioned the Victim Charter and said that victims do not even know that it is there. The Victim Charter should be the very first thing that people are told about when they become a victim. They should be told that, as victim, they have rights. If we are going to have a victims of crime commissioner, or whatever model the Minister chooses to bring forward after the feasibility study has been conducted, we need to ensure that victims understand what the model is, what it can do for them and how they can access it, because that is vital in all of this. There is no value in having a commissioner for anything if the people who rely on that commissioner do not understand how the model works, how to access it —

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

Ms Dillon: — and how it will benefit them. We will be supporting the motion.

Ms S Bradley: As the SDLP justice spokesperson, I support the motion, which calls on the Minister to conduct a feasibility study into the appointment of a victims of crime commissioner. I thank Doug Beattie and Robbie Butler for tabling the motion. It is timely as we discuss the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.

At the outset, I too refer to the Victim Charter, which I understand was put on a statutory footing in 2015. On inspection of the charter, I can say that it is a very worthy document. It contains much good information and is certainly a good starting point for learning what information should be shared with victims as soon as they are identified as being victims. There is no doubt that it is impressive and thorough, but what is concerning is that we have very little knowledge of how well that information is being used. The Chair of the Committee pointed today to the very good example in the report where it states that there is evidence that the Victim Charter is not being used at all. With all respect to the Victim Charter, and I commend it as a worthwhile document, it has zero value if it is sitting on a shelf and not being used and if victims are not being made aware of it.

With that in mind, I put it to the Minister that we have to ask serious questions about the charter. Do we know how it is being utilised across all agencies and areas? How often is it being revisited and updated? What process is in place to make sure that it is activated and used? There is evidence that it is not being used, and the mover of the motion rightly pointed to one case in particular, Mr Dolan's, as evidence of that. There are other cases that most of us will be aware of across our constituencies. We have many questions to ask about what the role of a victims of crime commissioner would look like. Would the charter be within the scope of a commissioner? I most certainly hope that it would be and that the charter itself would be one of the lead pieces of work.

Of course, anybody in the Chamber who sits on the Justice Committee will know the repeated deliberations that we have had on how effective the Domestic Abuse Bill really can be without there being adequate training, adequate follow-up, and somebody to oversee that the legislation is being enacted. Legislation is all well and good, and it may be the finest legislation ever crafted, but unless there is somebody to oversee it and ensure that every letter of it is enacted, it will end up having zero value.

Across many cases and many situations, the question that has routinely arisen is this: who is the overall guardian of everything that we hold important in order to support a victim? Right now, there is enough evidence for us put this question: is this the time to carry out the feasibility study and to look at who is that guardian? To my mind, having a victims of crime commissioner, as proposed in the motion, is a good start.

I commend and support the motion. I ask the Minister to have a broad and open mind on what that feasibility study might include, because there are many issues surrounding victims that need to be addressed at this time.

12.45 pm

Mr Blair: I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to support the motion, although I should make it clear at the outset

that I see the motion as a framework on which to build a more comprehensive and operative support system through which all victims of crime will receive a level of support that is suitable to their individual circumstances and requirements. Of course, the circumstances surrounding each crime are different, and the needs of each victim are different, so the support that they receive should be tailored and appropriate to their needs. The nature of the crime experienced by the victim should also be taken into account so that they receive effective service and support as they proceed through the justice system. Victims of hate crime, for example, who have experienced a personal attack because of their race, religious belief, sexual orientation, gender identity or even disability may have endured a lifetime of discrimination, and they will require a tailored approach to victim support.

In the context of the motion, we also need to consider the importance of victims to the policing scenario, the complexities that motivate hate crime and effective policing practices. One could argue that hate crime has become a gauge for contemporary police relations with vulnerable and marginalised communities, so we should consider the importance of how we police effectively and how police can lead conversations with such communities about crimes arising from prejudice. The history of underpolicing those communities and victims of crime is, of course, a separate issue, but it is also part of the picture. It is essential that we view that picture overall, not as a specific need, however important that need may be, but as part of the overall justice scene. It is important that the system provides support to victims of hate crime through the criminal justice process and signposts them to relevant services through their ongoing struggles for equality and justice.

I welcomed the Department's announcement, last year, of tackling intolerable hate crime and carrying out an independent review of hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland. Many parties will have already engaged with Judge Marrinan's review of hate crime. It is reassuring that the Department is fully engaged in that process. I also welcome the Minister's announcement of the establishment of a reference group to advise and inform on the requirement and necessity for a victims of crime commissioner.

Mindful of the need for future solutions and improvements to our victim support system to ensure effective service delivery, I support the motion and what it proposes. I am also hopeful that the motion and any outcomes from today's debate will be complementary to progress already made, will be considered in conjunction with processes already under way and, most importantly, will be taken forward with the individual needs of all victims as a top priority.

Mr Frew: I support the motion, but, as with my colleague Mr Givan, my first, frustrated question is why it is needed. Surely, in this day and age, in the liberal democracy in which we live, justice should be an ultimate right. What is the duty on government, devolved or otherwise, other than to keep its people safe and to establish and maintain justice? What is justice? Justice is a balance. When somebody commits a crime, the victim can expect redress and closure, if they can. They are compensated in a number of ways, and that compensation can come in various guises. There is balance. If a Government cannot

produce balance, you have to ask this question: what good are that Government to their people? That is the fundamental question that we are debating.

If we are saying to ourselves, as a legislature, that we need a victims of crime commissioner, even though we have a justice system, we have to ask ourselves how the justice system is working. Of course, government cogs turn slowly, and it is clear and it is a reality that justice has been devolved only recently, but that should not be the excuse for doing nothing. That should not be the excuse when we roll out improvement and it becomes a tick-box exercise. It should not be an excuse when you have countless CJINI reports talking about the failures of the justice system and countless Committee for Justice reports seeking redress and a better way for victims, yet nothing is done or it becomes a tick-box exercise. Nobody in this society deserves that. Victims of crime have to be supported by the justice system that is in place to protect their rights and to give them equal treatment in this country and within the law. When someone becomes a victim, there should be redress. We have heard the horror stories that the Victim Charter, with all its significance when it was brought in, is now being treated like a tick-box exercise. If you look at the fundamentals, you can see very quickly how the justice system can rapidly fall down and fail the victims — the very people that it is designed to protect — time and again.

It is not easy to suffer crime. No one here should wish crime on anyone or for victims to be created, but, when you become a victim, you have to go through a process of inquiry, answering questions and being placed in a court, and that is horrendous. Our court system is very robust — there are reasons for that — but the fact that we have a robust justice system that can be very confrontational in court is no reason not to support the victims that the justice system here is designed to support.

We will support the feasibility study on the appointment of a victims of crime commissioner, but the fundamental question that we, as legislators, must ask ourselves is this: why the need? Why have we got to a place where we need a commissioner to look after victims when the justice system should be the very instrument that seeks redress for those victims and supports them? With all the legal professions and the clear, balanced systems of justice —

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

Mr Frew: — how are we left seeking a commissioner for victims when the justice system should do that ably?

Ms Rogan: I welcome the motion and the debate. As a member of the Justice Committee, as other members of the Committee have mentioned, I have found it a revealing experience to hear evidence from key stakeholders and organisations, including many victims of crime. It has reinforced my views and the views of many of my colleagues on the importance of supporting victims of crime and making their journey through the criminal justice system less harrowing and more efficient and of better supporting policy and legislation that ensures that there is less crime prevalent in our communities and, therefore, fewer victims of crime.

At this early stage, I express my support for the motion. That is not necessarily consent to the establishment of a commissioner for victims of crime, but I support the calls for a feasibility study of the potential establishment of a

commissioner by weighing up all the potential benefits that it might have. The study should also explore all further options for best supporting victims, ensuring that their voices are heard and reflected in the development of strategies and policy, and filling any existing gaps. Some of my colleagues have already discussed, for example, the decision of the Scottish Government not to proceed with a victims' commissioner. However, there are other jurisdictions where victims' commissioners have been very effective and an efficient use of resources. Therefore, all options and models of best practice should be explored.

Victims have rights and entitlements that are laid out in the Victim Charter. It is important that those rights are not only fully respected by all but actively promoted and that victims of crime are informed of those rights. The Victim Charter, which was launched in 2015, followed a successful and highly useful report by the Justice Committee in 2012 on the criminal justice services available to victims and witnesses of crime.

The report, which was widely welcomed at the time, was very important in highlighting the gaps that existed in ensuring that victims of crime were supported and had access to their rights and the relevant information about the criminal justice process. I welcome today's debate, which is the latest effort of a renewed focus in the Assembly on supporting victims in the criminal justice system.

A potential victims of crime commissioner may be the best-placed person to coordinate the rights and entitlements of victims of crime, and the feasibility study should explore that. That follows on from the latest Criminal Justice Inspection report, from July of this year, on the treatment of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system. It recognises that, while many improvements have been made since its first report, 14 years ago, there remain a number of gaps, which can impact on public confidence and could deter victims from reporting crime. Therefore, there is a notable gap that could be filled by a commissioner or other support services.

I pay tribute to the vital contribution of organisations such as Victim Support. In the field of supporting victims, they provide emotional support, information and practical help to victims and witnesses, and their work is crucial. A victims' commissioner or any alternative model of support would be intended to complement and support the vital work of those support services.

My Sinn Féin colleagues and I pledge to support victims and commit to improving their knowledge and experiences. I also call on the Minister of Justice to indicate a timeline for the feasibility study to be carried out.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter as a member of the Justice Committee. Victims of crime deserve a proper level of support following a criminal offence being committed against them. We very much believe that victims must be at the very heart of the criminal justice system and that having a victim-centred approach in the justice system must always be a number-one priority for the Department of Justice.

The July 2020 report that was published by the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland provides a useful and interesting evidence base with its findings on the treatment of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system. When launching her recent report, the Chief Inspector

of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland, Jacqui Durkin, acknowledged that improvements have been made over recent years in how victims and witnesses are treated through the criminal justice system. While there have undoubtedly been some improvements in victims' support, there is a recognition that much more must be done to ensure better outcomes for victims, including bereaved families, and witnesses.

Some of the findings cause concern. Some five years on from the charter's launch, many victims and witnesses of crime remain totally unaware of their rights to support, information services and protection measures through their long journey and far beyond. The Victim Charter launched in 2015 by a previous Minister of Justice was a positive development in helping to ensure that victims have the minimum standards that they should expect from the justice system. Many victims and witnesses of crime are, understandably, often not as familiar with the justice system as some experienced perpetrators may be, and that is why clearly defined and effective measures must be put in place to support them.

The recent July report highlighted, as a major issue, the lack of awareness of the charter, as the Chairman of the Committee mentioned, and what it means for the rights and entitlements for victims and witnesses of crime. It was alarming that some of those who were interviewed for the report had very little or no knowledge at all of the charter being in place. There is a gap in community awareness, and we must focus on encouraging greater ownership of the charter and in providing reassurance and active engagement in the system and the processes. I ask the Minister to take action to address that gap, as doing so will ultimately improve and strengthen the support for victims. There is a need for a joined-up and comprehensive approach to supporting victims across the criminal justice system and in championing victims' rights. I believe that action is needed, whether that is through a stand-alone commissioner post or another form, to consistently monitor and benchmark the charter's implementation across the process and to help champion victims' support.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has also presented unique challenges for victims of crime, with a lack of court business being conducted during the lockdown, when, in many cases, emergency matters only were dealt with virtually. Even today, there are significant backlogs of court business and the virtual measures that are in place limit full engagement and participation in the justice system and often have an adverse impact on getting justice and, ultimately, support for victims.

1.00 pm

I recognise that some advances have been made, but more could be done. That is why I am happy to support the motion.

Ms Dolan: I do not think that anyone in the Chamber would disagree that all victims of crime deserve to receive the same support following a criminal offence being perpetrated against them and during any judicial proceedings. The Victim Charter that has been referred to was launched in January 2015, and it was anticipated that it would advise victims of crime about their entitlements and the standards of service that they could expect to receive when they came in contact with the criminal justice system.

Victims need access to services that are fit for purpose. Each victim and witness in the criminal justice system has their own needs. They need to be listened to, and they need to believe that they have been heard. Providing services and support that are tailored to their requirements runs parallel with ensuring that victims and witnesses get the personal help that they need. However, in July, a Criminal Justice Inspection report found that victims and witnesses remain fundamentally unaware of their rights to information, support and protection and that services to assist them were still not being consistently delivered to a quality standard. Obviously, when a criminal justice system fails to do that, it has a negative impact on public confidence in the justice system and could deter victims from reporting crimes. The report also identified that criminal justice organisations often focus too much on statistics, meeting targets and independence, and there is insufficient emphasis on personal experiences that often have a lifelong impact on victims, their families and those closest to them. While the report did not specify that a victims of crime commissioner should be established, it stated that substantial work is needed to raise awareness in the community about the Victim Charter and the Witness Charter.

Earlier this year, the Minister stated that, while the introduction of a victims of crime commissioner is not being proposed by her Department at this time, no final decision has been taken. She also stated that she intended to explore ways in which her Department could further develop new services or deliver existing support and protections more effectively.

Our neighbouring jurisdictions all have different forms of victim support, but the one that I find the most interesting is Scotland, to which my colleagues referred. Scotland does not have a victims of crime commissioner, but, in a response to a parliamentary question in 2018, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice responded:

"We remain of the view that funding for victims support organisations is a more effective use of resources ... Those organisations represent the interests of victims and provide robust input to Government consultation and the development of policy ... We are learning from their experiences in order better to inform and design support services, and to ensure that their voices will be heard."

Although I support the motion and the call for a feasibility study, I would need to see the details and potential impact of any proposed commissioner before concluding on the best and most effective method of supporting victims, listening to and amplifying their voices and ensuring that victim services and policy are of the highest standard.

Ms Bradshaw: I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party and will, of course, support the motion. Indeed, the motion provides a very welcome opportunity to restate to the House that the Minister announced over the summer that she will bring forward a reference group to engage with representative organisations in the community and voluntary sector to explore the role and remit of a new victims of crime commissioner for Northern Ireland. That, in fact, goes well beyond what the motion calls for, as it is a commitment not to whether there should be a commissioner, but how. I know that the sector was delighted by that announcement, as were individuals such

as Mr Charles Little, with whom I have been working, and who have been calling for that position for many years, including during the suspension of the Assembly. I am sure that those who tabled the motion and the whole House will recognise that it was great to see that the Justice Minister has put in place that first practical step through the reference group, not just to consider the feasibility of a commissioner but to drive the process forward clearly.

The Minister was determined to push it forward because so much value has been seen in the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales. That role has proved important in providing a strong voice for victims, their families and, notably, for the voluntary sector groups that provide services to them. However, we do not need to look beyond home to see clear evidence of the value of an independent advocate for victims of crime. Each one of us is motivated and disgusted by the callous nature in which victims are targeted, often chosen because of their isolation or other vulnerability.

As long ago as 2012, the Justice Committee's inquiry into the criminal justice services available to victims and witnesses of crime, recognised:

"that victims and witnesses have individual needs and some will require much more support and information than others".

Therefore, we need to be careful with the definition of "same support" mentioned in the motion. What we really mean is equal access to appropriate services and support. However, these will differ from case to case. What is important is that the commissioner's work produces clear outcomes for all victims and that all victims feel supported.

These outcomes may come in the form of amendments to programmes or services, the introduction of services and policies to aid victims, or simply a voice for victims so that they know that they are not alone. The important part is that services, support and advocacy are more-appropriate to the needs of victims than is currently the case and that they are accessible in a timely manner.

It is inevitable that this will mean that the role will involve linking with other advocates on behalf of those marginalised by or vulnerable to crime. Therefore, it is important that there is clarity in the role of commissioner and in how the postholder will work with existing victims' advocacy groups and then interact with the Justice Department and criminal justice system.

In the summer, we saw the launch of the Criminal Justice Inspection report on the care and treatment of victims and witnesses by the criminal justice system. That is another reason why this post needs to move forward. The report identified that crimes can have a lifelong and wide-ranging impact on the victim. One of those impacts is, sadly, almost unbearably, on mental well-being. That is why one core connection will, surely, be with the interim mental health champion, as the proposer of the motion will, no doubt, recognise. As we know, the emotional trauma and impact of being a victim of crime are devastating, and it may take many years to get over the trauma, if at all. The forthcoming mental health strategy needs to happen more swiftly than is proposed, not least to ensure that a clear framework and mechanism for delivering psychological therapies and the support necessary to help

victims to rebuild their lives can link in to the work of the commissioner.

In the Chamber, we have talked a lot about the needs of various groups of victims, be they the victims of historical institutional abuse, the Troubles, patients' experience of alleged physical abuse in health facilities or victims of domestic and sexual crime. It is clear that the Assembly wants to do everything in its power to support them and to put in place structures and policies to respond to their practical and emotional needs. However, we need to show more urgency, which is why I support the work of the Minister in taking this forward.

I place on record my admiration for and appreciation of the work of Victim Support NI —

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

Ms Bradshaw: — the NSPCC and other groups that provide such valuable support to victims and their families in dark and daunting times.

Mr Chambers: Crime can affect victims in many ways. They may suffer injuries, possibly even life-changing injuries. They may carry psychological scars for a long time as a result of the trauma of the crime, or they simply may have to deal with practical outcomes of the crime, which may be logistical or financial. If a perpetrator is brought before the court, the victim may be required to stand in the same courtroom, a few yards apart, and recount in detail what happened. Very few of us are equipped to deal with such a situation. The courtroom is an alien environment for law-abiding people.

The police do a good job in trying to keep the victims of crime informed of the progress of their investigations, but they have limited resources to continue that line of communication and contact over a lengthy period.

Having a family retail business that has had its fair share of robberies, which normally have come either with direct violence, or the very real threat of it, possibly drug-fuelled, I know that the aftermath of such a crime can linger with the victims. If it comes to court, the time spent in those unfamiliar and daunting surroundings can be a lonely and stressful experience, preceded by many sleepless nights. From that personal experience, I understand the effect of crime on victims. Indeed, a young member of my family had to arrange herself counselling after having a gun put to her mouth and suffering nightmares and flashbacks for some time afterwards.

Last week, the House held a debate on a possible introduction of Helen's law. It was driven by the sterling efforts of two families, the Dorrians and the Murrays. Both families have spoken highly of the support that the police have offered them, but I think that a victims of crime commissioner could provide families like them with a more formal line of communication and support. I believe that the contributions to the debate last week pointed up the pressing need and the positive help and support that all families that are victims of crime need and deserve.

We hear a lot about protecting the rights of those who are arrested on suspicion of committing a crime. Their rights are fully protected during a subsequent court case, and, indeed, that protection continues whilst they are serving a custodial sentence. That is as it should be and is a compliment to the type of society that we are. Why,

therefore, would we neglect or ignore the rights of victims of crime? Those who choose to commit crime knowingly make that decision; those who become victims do not have that choice. A feasibility study into the possibility of a victims of crime commissioner would be a good starting point to show that we are serious about victims. I commend the motion to the House.

Miss Woods: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion today as a member of the Justice Committee, and I thank the Members for tabling it. As other Members have mentioned, this year's Criminal Justice Inspection report makes it clear that we are still not doing enough to support victims and witnesses of crime. The report included a raft of recommendations and information to deal with key issues, and the most worrying fact of all is the chief inspector's statement, which many other Members mentioned, that victims and witnesses remain fundamentally unaware of their rights to information, support and protection and that services to assist them were not being consistently delivered to a quality standard across Northern Ireland. That is just not good enough, and I hope that the Minister will set out in her response how the Department intends to address each recommendation.

The Department's 'Victim and Witness Action Plan 2017-2020' is fast approaching its expiration date, so what plans do the Minister and the Department have to replace it? What plans are there to conduct a fully independent and detailed evaluation of its implementation and delivery, and what is next for the Department to ensure that key issues are being addressed?

I fully understand the rationale for bringing this motion today and recognise that victims of non-Troubles-related incidents currently have no advocate or voice to support them and guide them through the criminal justice system. Some will say that funding for victim-support organisations is a more effective use of resources, and, indeed, that is the position of the Scottish Government. However, have we listened to victim-support organisations, and what are they saying? Victim Support Northern Ireland has indicated that it supports the creation of a commissioner, and the Criminal Justice Inspection's report also highlights the need. Victim Support has said that such a role should have the appropriate power, resources and independence from government to hold all agencies to account and uphold the rights of victims under the Victim Charter.

Similarly, Women's Aid has actively campaigned for a specific commissioner to tackle domestic abuse. I believe that to be essential, given the significant proportion of all crime, recorded and unrecorded, that is linked to domestic abuse and violence. It is a mechanism for scrutinising legislation, policy, practice, commissioning, funding and provision, and, as other Members have said, from gathering evidence and working on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, it has become clear that more needs to be done to support victims and witnesses, especially measures that speed up the criminal justice system. Time and time again, we have heard from key stakeholders that the high attrition rate of witnesses was largely due to delays in cases and a lack of support, awareness and understanding of the system. Indeed, Dame Vera Baird QC, the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, was fully supportive of moves to introduce the new office, and there is an urgent need in Northern Ireland to provide better support for survivors

of abuse and help to address the high attrition rate of witnesses.

1.15 pm

I have previously called for, and I do so again, full implementation of the Gillen recommendations. Paragraph 2.87 on page 87 of the Gillen report states:

“The interviews I had with complainants frequently raised the issue of the trial process itself re-traumatising them”.

All victims and survivors must be treated with respect and dignity on their journey through the criminal justice system, including during the trial process. The system must support them. Perhaps the Minister can indicate the level of progress that the Department is making on the Gillen recommendations.

Victims and witnesses are entitled to know their rights, to be aware of the support that is available and to have information to guide them. In 2012, England and Wales appointed a Victims' Commissioner and have had a designate in place for victims of domestic abuse since 2019, recognising the significant role that the role can play in scrutinising, advising and being a powerful voice. It is time that we did the same.

Mr Allister: I am not at all hostile to the motion, but I do have some questions about where, if we travel down this road, a victims of crime commissioner will fit in the existing infrastructure. The last thing that we need is duplication, because duplication means needless expenditure. Some of my questions relate to issues such as this: we already have a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, so would that post be superseded by a general commissioner for victims of crime, or, indeed, would having a commissioner for victims of crime reflect the outrageous situation of the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors also representing and including victim makers?

There are other areas in which advocates are funded by the state. A number of charities, such as Victim Support, the NSPCC and Women's Aid, all get generous grants. They may not be, in some cases, as generous as the organisations think that they should be. Again, where would they fit in? Would they be superseded by a victims of crime commissioner's office? Would any duplication or any funding be required?

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for giving way. Rather than take on the role that we would envisage for a commissioner, Women's Aid plays a supporting role. Women's Aid provides refuge and such things. The commissioner's role would be to support what Women's Aid does and perhaps advocate on its behalf if it needed additional funding. Does the Member agree that there is potential for those two roles to be complementary rather than set against each other?

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

Mr Allister: I understand that Women's Aid, through hostels and all sorts of things, does much more than what a victims' commissioner would do. To that extent, there is an obvious complementarity there. There is, however, also the possibility of duplication, and I go back to my point that duplication means wasted resources. I would therefore like to

see very clearly, before we go down this road, an emphatic delineation of what it is that the victims' commissioner would do that others are not doing and of what others would not continue to do because the victims' commissioner would be doing it. Otherwise, we would be creating a bureaucracy that may not serve a great deal of advancement.

Yes, there is a role for a victims' commissioner, but it has to be defined in the context of the knock-on effect that it would have on existing structures elsewhere. Would we have two commissioners for the victims of terrorist crime in the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors and the commissioner for victims of crime? I do not know. We have, for example, a Historical Institutional Abuse Interim Advocate — yes, that is different, as there are unlikely to be many prosecutions hereafter — but would that advocacy role continue or morph into the role of the commissioner for victims of crime? Those are some of the questions that need to be addressed before we all rush to embrace a proposition that, on the face of it, is very attractive.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call on the Minister to respond, and she has up to 15 minutes.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I am grateful to the Member for Upper Bann and the Member for Lagan Valley for bringing the motion before the House, as it affords me an opportunity to update Members on the progress made following my announcement at the end of August that I was establishing a reference group to inform my approach to introducing a victims of crime commissioner. I welcome the opportunity to do that.

When someone becomes a victim of crime, it is not just unexpected but shocking. As well as the trauma of the crime itself, many individuals are unfamiliar with the criminal justice system. Victims face emotional, practical and, at times, physical challenges, and they need effective and appropriate support and assistance to help them navigate the criminal justice system. Victims' voices also need to be heard so that we can better understand the impact of their experiences and identify and put in place effective services to meet their needs. In what is an unusually short mandate of operational working in the Assembly and Executive, I have therefore prioritised in the Department of Justice those elements of legislation, policy and practice that will have the biggest positive and tangible impact on victims of crime, in terms of both the reduction of crime and improving the experience of victims as they pass through the system.

As I took up the role, I also spent time meeting victims of crime to listen to their experiences, good and bad, of the justice system, and I have sought to embed the positive elements further and address, in partnership with other parts of the justice family, the areas where the experience could be improved. Some of those meetings have been with some of the victims referenced today, including Charles Little and the parents of Enda Dolan, and with many others whose cases have already led to change in policy and practice for victims going through the system. That is why I asked my officials in the summer to establish a reference group to advise and inform my thinking around the role and remit of a victims of crime commissioner. After initial informal conversations with stakeholders from across the voluntary and community sector, statutory organisations and partners who are already in daily contact with victims, I have written formally to them to invite them to participate in the reference group. I have

asked the group to advise me on what the role, remit and functions of a victims of crime commissioner should be in order to improve the experience of victims, make their voices heard and represent their experiences, needs and interests to government. I am keen that the group should also explore how best a potential victims of crime commissioner could balance the challenge of representing the general interests of all victims of crime with a particular focus on the specific needs and requirements of vulnerable groups, such as victims of domestic abuse, sexual offences or hate crime.

Members will be aware of the good work that is already in place for victims of crime and, I am sure, will join me in paying tribute to the dedication of those across non-governmental organisations and the criminal justice system who provide essential support to victims already. Their role does not stop there, and I am grateful for their collaboration in helping to inform our collective strategic response in order to improve outcomes for victims in the criminal justice system. It is helpful to recognise the existing provision so that, in thinking through the role of a commissioner, we seek to build on what is there rather than duplicate it. It is essential that a victims of crime commissioner brings added value and makes a measurable difference to victims' experience in the criminal justice system and does not simply duplicate existing arrangements. For once, Mr Allister and I are of a mind in that regard. Therefore, I have asked the reference group to consider the existing services available to victims of crime and identify any gaps so that our focus can be on meeting genuine need, filling those gaps and improving the experience of victims. The reference group will meet later this month and in early November and will report to me by the end of December. Once I have considered its report, I will meet the group in early January to discuss their advice prior to making decisions on the best way forward.

Coupling our progress with that of the Westminster legislation would not be the appropriate mechanism for a number of reasons. In England, much of the focus is on ensuring consistency across various services that are disparate in nature in their scenario. However, here, most of those services are delivered by unitary authorities, which would make that less of a focus for a victims of crime commissioner here; in fact, that is one of the reasons why Scotland has not ventured down that path. Further, we should look specifically at the needs of victims locally and what is in place by way of service. With that in mind, I want to answer the question that was put to us about the potential conflation of the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors with a victims of crime commissioner. I believe that the remit and the focus of the two roles are too different and that the needs and issues in respect of each cohort of victims are very different. Our focus is very much on ensuring that the needs and interests of victims of crime who are going through the criminal justice system today are represented and provided for. Conflating the two roles would not only lead to a lack of clarity about the purpose and functions of the role and dilute focus but, crucially, be unlikely to meet the needs or deliver improved outcomes for either cohort of victims effectively.

While I said at the outset that I am broadly supportive of the motion, there is one area where I will challenge the wording, and that is where it calls for:

"all victims of crime ... to receive the same support".

The needs of each victim are different, and therefore the available support should be appropriate to those needs, taking account of their experience, the crime type and their vulnerability, age and circumstances. One size does not fit all in these arrangements. Therefore, I argue that the motion ought to agree that all victims of crime deserve to receive effective and proper support following a criminal offence being perpetrated against them and during any judicial proceedings. However, I fully agree with the intent that all victims need and deserve support. Much excellent collaborative work is already in place to deliver it, and we continue to refine and improve the support available. That includes new work to introduce a robust needs assessment from the first contact with criminal justice organisations. That is a time when victims may feel particularly vulnerable, and that trauma and its effects are not always evident when the crime is reported. The new approach will ensure that individual needs continue to be reviewed and that information is shared with the criminal justice organisations with which they will come into contact.

When it comes to improving the criminal justice system for victims, my Department and the criminal justice organisations are not standing still. In terms of support for all victims of crime, my Department provides significant funding of £1.9 million to Victim Support Northern Ireland to provide a range of support services to victims and witnesses. Over 50,000 victims and witnesses are offered help and support by Victim Support each year, and that support is available from when someone becomes a victim of crime through to when they give their evidence at court. Victim Support also provides advocacy support for those who need assistance with issues as they journey through the system. Funding of £439,000 has been made available for the NSPCC's young witness service to provide tailored court support for all young prosecution witnesses who are called to give evidence. Around 500 young witnesses are supported each year to give their best evidence. My Department also funds specific services to support victims of specific crimes, such as domestic and sexual abuse, hate crime, human trafficking and crimes against older people. For those who are vulnerable or have difficulty with communicating, my Department provides registered intermediaries who are communication specialists who assist vulnerable children and adults with significant communication deficits to communicate their answers more effectively during police interview and when giving evidence at trial. In 2019-2020, there were 947 referrals to the scheme for victims, witnesses, suspects and defendants.

All those valuable services are aligned with the Victim Charter, to which many Members have referred. I am delighted to be in a position to take up this issue where my colleague David Ford left off. Obviously, the hiatus in the interim was beyond my control, but I am passionate about taking it forward now. The Victim Charter sets out the entitlements of victims, the services that are to be provided and the standard of services that victims should expect, as well as the obligations on a wide range of organisations to deliver information services and support. It has impacted positively on victims because it has shaped the service that they receive. It is not the case that it has been on the shelf. However, I am fully cognisant of the fact that more could be done to make victims aware of it.

Clearly, we need to recognise where those improvements can be made and take action to address those issues, so I acknowledge the recent Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland report, which was published in July and highlighted a number of such issues, particularly around keeping victims informed about their case and raising awareness of the Victim and Witness Charters to enhance their impact and effectiveness. I thank Gordon Dunne, in particular, for more accurately reflecting the full landscape of the CJINI report than some other Members did. Of course, it highlighted areas for improvement. However, I think that some Members failed to read the rest of the report, where it noted that significant improvement had been made since the last report. It is important that we do not focus only on the areas where improvement is still required and acknowledge to our partners and others where improvement has already been achieved.

1.30 pm

My officials are working closely with operational partners and support services to address the issues. I plan to publish a multi-agency action plan setting out our collective approach within the coming weeks. Hopefully, that action plan will address the concerns that I and other Members who spoke today share about awareness of the charter in particular. In addition, the Department is continuing to work with partners to consider our overall strategic response to the issues affecting witnesses and victims within the criminal justice system.

For those who have been victims of a sexual offence, one of my key priorities is to progress the implementation of the Gillen review of the law and procedures in serious sexual offences. I am pleased that we have now published the implementation plan and established work streams. A wider discussion with Executive Ministers will also be required to deliver the societal change on which it is based. Legislation is also progressing to implement elements of Gillen that require legislation, and we hope that that will be part of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

A wide range of work is being taken forward and good progress is being made against a number of those key recommendations. That includes work to allow vulnerable and intimidated victims and witnesses to provide evidence remotely from the court building by the end of this year. It also allows for new arrangements for victims of serious sexual offences to be able to avail themselves of publicly funded legal advice by the start of the next financial year.

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mrs Long: I will, yes.

Ms Dillon: Does the Minister agree that other Departments and Ministers need to do something similar in putting together a working group to implement the recommendations that impact their Departments, particularly those around education?

Mrs Long: I completely agree. Whilst we take the lead on the Gillen review, I would certainly welcome an active interest from Executive colleagues on the aspects where they can take it forward.

A particular issue with the justice system is about progressing the speed with which cases can be taken forward. That matters to victims, witnesses, their families

and their communities. It can also help offenders to better understand the implications of their actions and create a better opportunity for rehabilitation. Therefore, speeding up justice is one of the biggest challenges facing the system, not least in the current context, and it is a priority for my Department, criminal justice partners and the Criminal Justice Board. Reducing the time that it takes to complete criminal cases is a challenging and complex issue. Reforms take time to embed for their impacts to be seen. However, I am focused on improving this through a number of programmes, for example, the Gillen review and reforming committal reform.

I am committed to tackling the abhorrent crime of domestic abuse, which affects many in society, and I am conscious that not everyone reports such crime to the police. I am keen to ensure that victims have the confidence to pursue justice against those perpetrating those crimes. I also recognise the detrimental impact that COVID-19 continues to have on victims of domestic abuse and their greater vulnerability in this period. I remain committed to ensuring that the most vulnerable have access to the services that they need and are aware of the support and help that is available to them, including the 24-hour domestic and sexual abuse helpline.

Positive progress has also been made in implementing actions under the Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland strategy. Members will be aware of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill currently in Committee Stage. While I recognise that there have been calls for a domestic abuse commissioner, I am not convinced that that is the most effective way to deliver support for those affected by that crime. With potential calls for multiple, different commissioners to cover specific crime types, there could be a significant duplication of effort. We have to recognise that that is not necessarily making the best use of what are very limited resources. Rather, given the common interests of the needs of victims and how they are supported, I believe that a general victims of crime commissioner provides a better model to go forward. What will be important is that it should focus on victims with specific vulnerabilities, such as domestic and sexual abuse. That is why, as I said, I have specifically tasked the reference group to look at the issue of how to best balance the needs and interests of victims of crime more widely, with a focus on particularly vulnerable groups.

When people become victims of these crimes, which, as a society, we can no longer tolerate, it is essential that those affected have access to support services. That is also why I am introducing a new advocacy support service to help victims of domestic and sexual abuse as they go through the criminal justice system. That new initiative will build on existing support services providing a coordinated response to the needs of victims.

Hate crime is another area where more can be done, both within the justice system and wider society, to challenge what is completely intolerable prejudice and hatred that, at its most extreme, can motivate people to commit serious offences against vulnerable people in the community.

It is worth noting that, while the victims of the crime may only be one or two people, the fact and perception that it was motivated by hatred has a much wider impact.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Minister to draw her remarks to a close.

Mrs Long: Judge Marrinan will report on the matter to the Department in December.

I believe that there is an opportunity for a victims of crime commissioner to be taken forward, and I look forward to updating Members on the progress of that in the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Mike Nesbitt to make a winding-up speech on the motion and debate. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

Mr Nesbitt: I begin by declaring an interest as a former commissioner at the Commission for Victims and Survivors.

It is worth recalling that, in the build-up to devolution in 1998, a huge effort was put into ensuring that these institutions were fair and equitable, free from discrimination and imbalance and, as John Blair said, free from hatred, and also that they were just. Mr Frew made much of the fact that we had to define justice in our dealings. We made great efforts: I think, for example, of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, which places duties on public bodies to offer equality of opportunity to nine named groups in our society. Of course, there are always gaps. Mr Allister mentioned historical institutional abuse and the fact that the Hart inquiry did not cover everybody. A cleric could have abused boy A in an institutional setting on a Monday morning, then, after lunch, abused boy B in a domestic setting. Only boy A had recourse to Hart. In fact, a former junior Minister told a Committee that boy B could go to the police or to social services, a remark perhaps lacking in empathy but certainly lacking in balance.

Here we have another example of a gap. We have a Commission for Victims and Survivors for conflict-related incidents, but we do not have a commissioner for the victims of crime. I commend Mr Beattie for proposing the motion with his usual logic, common sense, passion and, indeed, moderation. As some Members, including Emma Rogan and Jemma Dolan, pointed out, it is possible to support the motion calling for a feasibility study without committing to supporting the appointment of a victims of crime commissioner. Mr Beattie's remarks were passionate and grounded when he talked about real victims such as the family of Enda Dolan, the young man killed by a drug- and drink-driver.

The Victim Charter was mentioned by many, beginning with Mr Beattie, and I have heard about two problems with it during the debate. The first problem is practical: Sinéad Bradley, Gordon Dunne, Rachel Woods and Jemma Dolan all pointed out that the charter is not used properly and, more importantly perhaps, far too many victims do not know about it or understand it. Jemma Dolan had a solid evidence base and referred to this year's report by the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. The second problem with the Victim Charter, as Mr Beattie said, is that it is one half of a whole, and the second half is missing: a champion to promote it. That is why he thinks that we should have a victims of crime commissioner. Without such a commissioner, Mr Beattie suggested that we could be lagging behind England and Wales. Paula Bradshaw spoke very positively about the impact that the Victims' Commissioner has had in England and Wales, although the Minister made it clear that she will not repeat that model and just mimic what is being done in England, for which she gave her reasons.

Mr Givan, the Chair of the Justice Committee, pointed out that the idea of the Victim Charter first came from a legacy Justice Committee, which reported as long ago as 2012. He described it as a "unanimous and comprehensive report", which included a call for the charter that came in three years later in 2015. How do we promote it? How do we ensure equality of services? Linda Dillon pointed out that we want the same support and services for all victims. Ms Dillon also pointed out that perhaps it would have been better if the motion had come from the Committee, as it might carry more weight. I remind the Member that the Committee can bring forward legislation to introduce a commissioner for the victims of crime if it so wishes.

A few years ago — it was 2016, I think — the legacy Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister introduced legislation that provided for the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, so there is a precedent for Committees taking such action, if they so wish. The Minister suggested, however, that that probably will not be necessary because she has committed to establishing what she calls a reference group. When Emma Rogan asked for a timeline, the Minister provided one. It appears that the reference group is due to report to her in December this year, and, in January 2021, she will meet it to discuss a way forward.

The Minister appeared to suggest that we should not conflate the Commission for Victims and Survivors of the conflict with the proposed commissioner, suggesting that perhaps the needs of the two sets of victims are different. As a former commissioner at the Commission for Victims and Survivors, I can tell her that I have spent many, many hours listening to victims repeating the most horrific stories of their traumatising engagements with the criminal justice system. A woman who was very badly damaged in the Omagh bomb went to court for compensation. Her solicitor said, "A bit of paper will be put in front of you. It will have your initial offer of compensation; just ignore it. It's a game, and I play the game. You don't know how to do it. Trust me". The paper was put in front of her, and she decided that she would ignore it. Then, however, the judge asked her to remove her dress so that he could look at her injuries. He was not a doctor. The NHS had provided a file on her injuries, and yet he humiliated her by asking her to remove her dress. The consequence was that she lifted the bit of paper and accepted the offer because she could not face going back in for another session. We need to be very clear about the experiences of victims and survivors of crime and conflict-related crime.

Alan Chambers was very clear about the potentially traumatic experience of engaging in the criminal justice system. Rachel Woods referred to the Gillen review and the effect of re-traumatisation on so many victims of crime.

Overall, we need to welcome this debate and welcome, broadly speaking, the Minister's response, because it appears that, with the reference group, we are working our way towards the potential appointment of a victims of crime commissioner. Mr Allister had some good points and questions about how that appointment would fit into the current framework.

I finish by, once again, commending Mr Beattie for not only tabling the motion but wording it in such a way that it appears that it will get universal support. When Mr Allister begins his remarks by pronouncing that he is not at all

hostile to a motion, you must know that you are on to a winner.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that all victims of crime deserve to receive the same support following a criminal offence being perpetrated against them and during any judicial proceedings; and calls on the Minister of Justice to conduct a feasibility study into the appointment of a victims of crime commissioner who would act as a focal point, champion and advocate and bring forward best practice in dealing with, and supporting, victims of crime.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease before we move to the next item of business.

1.45 pm

Consequences of the British Government Breaking International Law

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That this Assembly is appalled that the British Government have abandoned any pretence of adherence to international law; recognises that the potential for a trade agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom has significantly diminished as a result of the British Government reneging on key elements of the withdrawal agreement; acknowledges that that would be devastating for workers and families, with inevitable business failures, job losses and economic damage; and calls on the British Government to respect the rule of law and honour their obligations in full as set out in the withdrawal agreement that they negotiated and which the British Parliament agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

Dr Archibald: On 8 September, the British Secretary of State for the North, Brandon Lewis, confirmed in the House of Commons that the Internal Market Bill would break international law. In doing so, he confirmed what everyone already knew: that the Bill, as enacted, fundamentally breaches the withdrawal agreement and the protocol on Ireland. The blatancy of this admission, however, was greeted with shock and dismay; it defies the norms expected of states that operate on accepted conventions. It is also, in fact, a breach of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT). The convention is a standard that states are held to when they sign international agreements, such as the withdrawal agreement to which the British Government are a signatory.

The response has been damning, not just from the EU, which would be expected, but the British political and legal classes have been equally vociferous. Diplomats and politicians from all shades have condemned the bad faith and lamented the impact that these actions will have on holding other states to account. The Internal Market Bill is a step too far, even for Geoffrey Cox, the British Attorney General who, this time last year, presided over the proroguing of Parliament debacle. He slated it, stating that it:

“ultimately leads to very long-term and permanent damage to this country’s reputation”.

Of course, anyone with any sense who has one eye to future trade deals also realises the potential impact and reputational damage that such actions will have. Why would anyone hold faith with any agreement that the British Government sign up to in the future?

The strong response from the US has continued, with bipartisan support towards upholding the protections afforded to the Good Friday Agreement by the protocol in the withdrawal agreement. The consequence will be no trade deal between Britain and the US unless the protections are upheld. Let us be clear: the protections of

the protocol on Ireland provide some degree of certainty for the all-island economy and to protect North/South cooperation. However, the protocol will function most effectively in the context of a comprehensive free-trade agreement based on zero tariffs.

That is what is most frustrating and utterly futile about the Internal Market Bill. It has increased uncertainty and has damaged relations and trust in the negotiation process: a process that we already knew was difficult and slow. It seems that Boris Johnson and his cronies have spent the past 10 months in denial about what they signed up to and ratified in the withdrawal agreement. Instead of putting their best endeavours into finding reasonable and workable outcomes, particularly for the protocol, they have tried to wriggle out of the commitments that they made.

We are now looking at a very tight timetable to see the negotiations conclude, with the key stocktaking looming at the EU Council meeting on 15 October. The reality is that it is our businesses, our communities and our economy that will stand to suffer worst from a no-trade-deal outcome and our highly integrated supply chains that will be the most damaged by increased barriers. Our business community has been very clear that what it needs but does not have right now is clarity. With the clock ticking down rapidly, it fears what is coming down the line at the end of the year. Even if there is an agreement, the timetable to implement what is agreed is too tight. The business community could not be any more clear: it wants an agreement that creates the minimum of bureaucracy.

As I stand here, amid growing numbers of COVID-19 cases and the potential for increased restrictions, I am very mindful that our businesses have already faced months of the most difficult circumstances. That has already caused debt to be accrued and has put many jobs on the line. Many workers and families are already struggling as a result, and, at the end of this month, we face the ending of the furlough scheme, which will see thousands more jobs lost. It is already a bleak economic outlook, with predictions of record unemployment, and that is without even taking into account a no-trade-deal outcome.

Like, I am sure, everyone else here, I have absolutely no desire to see a hard administrative border down the Irish Sea that damages our businesses, many of which are SMEs with no real capacity to deal with the cost and red tape that is associated with such a border. Those on the opposite Benches who criticise the protocol, and particularly those who campaigned for the sunny uplands that we now face, have no alternative that guarantees North/South or east-west trade on the same basis that we now have in the context of the type of Brexit that Britain has insisted on, because they are, in fact, contradictory aims.

Brexit itself is the cause of the difficulties that we face. Although the protocol offers some protections, nothing is as frictionless as the arrangements that we currently have. In that respect, the future arrangements negotiations is the only show in town. At this point, we are all familiar with the issues that are still causing difficulties: fisheries, state aid and governance. That was restated at the end of last week's round of negotiations. Concerns remain about the lack of meaningful proposals from the British negotiators, so the focus at this point needs to be on finding resolutions to those issues and on ensuring that the technicalities of

the protocol are worked through to a positive conclusion as quickly as possible.

The Internal Market Bill has been an unnecessary distraction in that regard and does not, despite what the British Government and the Bill's proponents say, resolve the issues of unfettered access. The rumour that the British Government will go further still and legislate for the definition of "at-risk goods" would be even more unhelpful and would cause deeper ructions in the negotiations. A lot of the discussion until now has been on how the Internal Market Bill breaches the withdrawal agreement commitments on issues of trade, but last week saw a significant intervention from the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission, when they outlined how the Bill also breaches the Good Friday Agreement and the protocol commitment on rights. That is deeply concerning, particularly in the context of this British Government's known intentions for the Human Rights Act.

It is vital that all aspects of the protocol be fully implemented and that there be no watering-down of those rights protections, either in an apparent way or by stealth. Following the publication of the Internal Market Bill, the EU clearly set out its response: if the British Government did not, by 30 September, remove the clauses of the Bill that breach the withdrawal agreement, it would take legal action for breach of agreement. The Internal Market Bill was passed in the House of Commons last Tuesday without necessary amendments. On 1 October, the EU issued legal action on the basis that the Bill breaches the good faith articles of the withdrawal agreement and that, if it becomes law, it will breach the protocol commitments.

It is deeply unfortunate that that action was necessary, but the British Government need to be held accountable for what they agreed to.

It seems to have come as a surprise to some in the British Government, and to some here in the North, that the EU has followed through and taken the action that it stated it would. The British Government have form, of course, when it comes to not implementing agreements, but, to borrow a phrase, they are playing senior hurling now; not living up to commitments will not cut it. Worse still is stating that you intend to deliberately breach them.

Hopefully, the British Government will take the necessary action to prevent further consequences. It is also worth remembering that the leaders of the political groups in the European Parliament stated:

"Should the UK authorities breach — or threaten to breach — the Withdrawal Agreement, through the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill in its current form or in any other way, the European Parliament will, under no circumstances, ratify any agreement between the EU and the UK."

A Member: Ooh.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Please, no interruptions from a seated position. Let the Member continue.

Dr Archibald: There is much at stake over the next number of weeks. A great deal is at stake for our communities and businesses across this island. Therefore, it is absolutely imperative that the British Government backtrack from that course of action, respect the rule of

law and honour their obligations in full, as set out in the withdrawal agreement which they negotiated and which the British Parliament ratified. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Paul Givan.

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance

COVID-19: Support for Businesses

1. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any discussions that have taken place between his Department and Her Majesty's Government regarding further support packages for businesses impacted by further COVID-19 restrictions. (AQO 788/17-22)

12. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Finance what discussions he has had with the UK Treasury on the continuation or creation of a new furlough-type scheme. (AQO 799/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will group questions 1 and 12.

I have discussed the Treasury support schemes directly with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on a number of occasions, and my officials are in regular contact with their Treasury counterparts. We have been calling consistently for the gaps in support to be addressed and for that support to be continued for as long as it is needed. I wrote to the Chancellor and to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to urgently call on them to change course and extend the coronavirus job retention scheme past the end of October closing date, particularly for those hardest-hit sectors. Following the Chancellor's subsequent announcement that it will be replaced by a job support scheme from 1 November, I spoke to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to raise my significant concerns that it provides less support than the furlough scheme, and that employers will not be able to afford the higher contributions required to subsidise wages.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his response. We know the devastating impact that lockdown had on local businesses and employees across Northern Ireland. Given the speculation about a circuit-breaker-type approach, will the Minister confirm to the House the different types of financial packages, alongside Her Majesty's Government's support, that he is looking at to see businesses through this already difficult time?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that we have had a range of financial packages from business support grants to rates relief. Added to those, we have had the VAT reduction for tourism and hospitality, the furlough scheme that I referred to, the continuation of an employee support scheme, and loans have been made available. There has been a whole range of packages to support businesses.

Undoubtedly, we continue to face into very concerning times. This morning at the Executive, I outlined a possible support package for the Derry city and Strabane area. We may be looking at other localised lockdowns, given the spread of the virus and how that has alarmed us all in recent days. The Executive have not taken any decisions in relation to the circuit-breaker-type approach that the

Member refers to. I am aware that the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, made some comments in relation to additional support if we do get to that. I wrote today to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, to seek an urgent meeting to see what levels of support might be available. I understand that the First Minister and deputy First Minister are seeking to speak to Boris Johnson in relation to that very soon.

Mr O'Dowd: The furlough scheme has been a lifeline for many workers and their families and, indeed, for employers to keep skilled employees in place. Will the Minister outline how the job retention scheme that has now been announced compares to the furlough scheme?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for the question. There are other schemes available in other parts. I suppose that the big difference is that the employer is not required to contribute for hours not worked. We believe that that is a big shortcoming of the scheme announced by the Treasury to replace the furlough scheme. An employee has to work at least one third of the time. Therefore, anybody who is unable to work would not qualify for the furlough scheme. They have to work one third of the time, which is paid by the employer. The Government will only pay one third of the remaining contributions. Therefore, effectively, the employer will be paying two thirds of that contribution. That poses a very significant challenge for employers and forces them into taking decisions. That will particularly affect low-paid and part-time workers who are unlikely to be able to make up one third of their normal work hours before they could even be considered to qualify.

People should know that the furlough scheme continues for the rest of this month. People who qualified for the furlough scheme up to June can reapply to it, in the event that there are further restrictions. In our assessment, the scheme that has been introduced will present very serious challenges and is more likely to affect low-paid and part-time employees.

Mr Catney: Minister, has any consideration been given to a £500 payment to workers who are self-isolating, as has been announced in England?

Mr Murphy: That matter has been discussed at the Executive. We have two versions, as is often the case with the Government at Whitehall. One is that there is perhaps some Barnett consequential available to us for that approach, and another version is that we have received all the Barnett consequentials that we are to have and it is, therefore, up to the Executive to find some support in that regard. We want to try to bottom that out. If there is a scheme to be brought forward, it would have to be brought forward by the relevant Department to the Department of Finance for assessment and recommendation to the Executive.

Mr Humphrey: Minister, you will be aware that many people across Northern Ireland are in fear of their jobs being lost at the end of October when the furlough scheme comes to an end. A couple of weeks ago, I asked you about discussions that you were having with Her Majesty's Treasury about the continuation of that scheme. Obviously, it has made its position much clearer. Can you assure people who face that decision at the end of this month that you and the Executive are doing all that you can to secure jobs and provide inward investment from Her Majesty's

Treasury to ensure that those jobs are protected and that their families are protected?

Mr Murphy: My view is that the scheme now outlined to begin from 1 November is very much substandard in comparison with the furlough scheme. It will place a significant challenge on and pose a question to employers about whether to retain workers, and, consequently, that will lead to a greater number of redundancies. That will be a challenge. In recent times, the Executive have been allocating money for economic recovery, and, of course, we will continue to try to stimulate economic recovery and protect jobs wherever we can.

In regard to the possibility of further lockdowns, as I said, I have written to the Chancellor today to seek an urgent meeting, because there is some indication that there may be further support if we are in a more serious lockdown situation. Obviously, we want to ascertain what that will amount to.

Mr Stewart: Minister, will you give us an idea of any bids that you have received from the Departments for Infrastructure or Communities in support of COVID-related measures that the Department for the Economy has failed to deliver on and whether any further Executive direction has been given to the Economy or Finance Departments to speed up implementation of the COVID relief?

Mr Murphy: The question relates to the sectors that have not yet been addressed in terms of support during this. Of course, in recent weeks, there was an agreement between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the Department for the Economy and the Department for Infrastructure that Infrastructure would take some responsibility for delivering on that. I have spoken to the Infrastructure Minister and have said that I would like to see, as quickly as possible, some figures on that.

As you will know from my statement last week, we have set aside a pot of money to try to cover the costs that may arise from meeting the needs of those sectors. The earlier we have some indication of what those figures may be, the sooner we will know what we now face, which is some localised restrictions and the support required for that, and what the Executive have to try to deliver support there, because we have a very limited COVID pot left from which to distribute support.

Lisnaskea Health Centre: Business Case

2. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the business case for the proposed new health centre in Lisnaskea. (AQO 789/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Health submitted a revised business case for the new Lisnaskea health and care centre to my Department on 17 September. Department of Finance officials are reviewing the business case in line with established guidelines and aim to respond to the Department of Health as speedily as possible.

Mr Lynch: I welcome the fact that the healthcare centre business case has finally arrived on the Minister's desk. I visited the current health centre on Friday afternoon. It is not fit for purpose. The roof leaks like a sieve, and, at night, computers are covered in plastic to prevent water getting into them. Does the Minister agree that the delivery of the new healthcare centre in Lisnaskea will help the health needs of the people of that area?

Mr Murphy: I am not familiar with the building, but I have no reason to doubt what the Member says about it. Of course, we want to see the proper standard of facilities, particularly in relation to healthcare in the current climate but, generally speaking, also in terms of public services for all citizens. I am glad that what is clearly a significant requirement for an improved facility in Lisnaskea is now moving through the business case approval process, and I hope and certainly will ensure that the officials in my Department respond to that as quickly as possible, and then it is simply a question of moving on to the development stage of that.

Mrs Barton: Minister, will you outline the close cooperation that you have had with the Department of Health in working to deliver the badly needed facilities in Fermanagh? Do you agree that, under his stewardship, Robin Swann is driving through much-needed enhancements in Fermanagh?

Mr Murphy: We work very closely with the Department of Health on a range of matters, not least the significant issues that are facing us during the pandemic. Minister Swann has acknowledged, on a number of occasions, that the Department of Finance and the Department of Health have a very close working relationship. We need that, because Health is the biggest-spending Department, and we need to ensure that the money that it is spending is spent in such a way that it meets the scrutiny requirements of the Finance Department. I have no doubt that we have worked very well. I am sure that the Member can attest more than I can to the delivery of the Health Minister in her constituency, but I am happy to continue that very productive working relationship with the Department and the Minister.

Agile Working Hubs

3. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to promote agile working hubs for public-sector staff living outside Belfast. (AQO 790/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department is planning to establish regional hubs to address regional balance and to contribute to reducing emissions by cutting down on the number of cars travelling long distances.

As Members will appreciate, COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on how we conduct our business, now and into the future, and in many respects has accelerated our thinking about new ways of working. My officials are analysing data and the impact of new technologies on the wider public-sector network to determine where the hubs might be best located within the region to maximise the potential benefits.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for his response. I know that he is acutely aware of the significant strain that travel puts on civil servants who have to travel into Belfast. Is the Minister considering locating any of those regional hubs in the north-west? I am particularly interested in Fort George and Ebrington as two sites that he might consider.

Mr Murphy: That work was ongoing in the Department and predates the COVID pandemic. As is the case with a lot of working practices, it will have been accelerated by the current experience. We need to find not only better ways for people to work from home if they cannot travel but ways in which they can work in smaller units and

be more productive. We will want to look at a range of potential sites around the region. Yes, of course, Derry is under consideration, as is Omagh, given that the Member referred to the north-west. That is by no means an exhaustive list.

The work is in the early stages. One of our first exercises, particularly in some of the city Departments, will be to track where staff are travelling to and from in their home-to-work journeys. Interestingly, you can see the number of staff who are spending a long time trekking in and out to Belfast every day. Of course, we must have a balance, because we also want to have active city centres. However, there had already been a need for regional hubs, and I think that that has been accelerated. Those will also be effective in meeting the Executive's targets on carbon reductions. Dialogue had been taking place with the trade unions, and many civil servants are looking forward to it.

NICS Annual Leave

4. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Finance to outline how the capacity to take annual leave in the Northern Ireland Civil Service has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 791/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Civil Service recognises that it is important for its staff to use annual leave and actively encourages its staff to do so for their own well-being, through departmental messaging and comprehensive guidance via the staff coronavirus NICS hub.

Although the capacity for staff to take leave, and the policy on staff taking annual leave in the Civil Service, has not changed as a direct result of COVID-19, there have been some inevitable exceptions to the timing of leave being taken by those, for example, classed as key workers for example, due to operational demands. Those are being managed on a case-by-case basis.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. There appears to be a concerted effort to get staff in the Civil Service to take leave. I know that they can carry over only nine days a year. That is causing problems in the likes of MOT and driving test centres, in particular, where there is a backlog and the challenging situation of over 3,000 on waiting lists. Is it possible to adjust the number of days that can be carried over to lessen that impact on services, where it is agreed with the staff?

Mr Murphy: We have to be flexible, given the circumstances that we are facing, but we also have to bear in mind the fact that staff are entitled to take leave. It is good for their physical and mental health to be able to take leave. A huge backlog has been created by the circumstances that we are facing, but that does not mean that staff should be forced to work 24/7 in order to address that backlog.

It is a balance between trying to catch up on work that has been lost and ensuring that staff are able to do that. One way of being able to do that is to have that availability of annual leave so that people can recharge their batteries and get back to work in a productive fashion.

2.15 pm

Dr Archibald: On enhanced rights for workers, does the Minister agree that agency workers in the Civil Service

should be entitled to annual leave on the same basis as permanent workers?

Mr Murphy: Yes, I do. Not only that but a paper that I had cleared at the Executive this morning provides for that. Agency workers have provided key support for our public services, and, in many cases, they have not enjoyed the same rights as Civil Service workers. Therefore, we have taken measures to try to address that and to ensure that agency workers are entitled to annual leave and to leave for medical or dental necessities. We want to ensure that and to ensure that they enjoy the same rights as those working permanently in the Civil Service, because they provide the same level of service as civil servants.

COVID-19: Centrally Held Funding

5. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the COVID-19-related funding being held centrally. (AQO 792/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Following the allocations announced on 24 September, the following funding is being held centrally: £0.4 million for transfer to the Department for Transport in England for the ferry operator scheme; £55.2 million for further sectoral support and currently unforeseen PPE requirements; and £600 million pending the Department of Health's assessment of pressures for the remainder of 2020-21.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. I am also mindful of his response to question 1. The Minister is well aware of the various sectors that are still waiting for financial support as a result of the initial lockdown. What reassurance can the Minister give that, as we enter another phase of lockdown, localised or wider, which will inevitably place further pressure on already very limited resources, those sectors will not be pushed to the back of the queue?

Mr Murphy: We have set aside that funding, and the Executive have agreed that it will be held to meet the pressures on those sectors. Additional pressures are coming in, too, and we want to ensure that the pot that we have stretches to meet all of that. It took some time to address that. I regret that that was the case, but there were, if you like, overlaps between various Departments to try to get those issues addressed. I have asked that figures be brought forward to us as quickly as possible so that we can make an assessment of what is required to meet the needs of those sectors and what may be left over from some of the new pressures that we now face. We have to do that balancing exercise. There is a commitment to get schemes to meet the needs of those sectors, and funding is set aside for that purpose.

Dr Aiken: One of the Minister's previous answers referred to the transfer of responsibilities, as mandated by the Executive, from the Department for the Economy to the Department for Communities and, indeed, the Department for Infrastructure. Will you outline, therefore, if you are looking at any future transfer of resources, which is vital, from the Department for the Economy to the Department for Communities and, indeed, the Department for Infrastructure to enable them to deliver on those COVID-related issues?

Mr Murphy: When we transfer a responsibility, the funding to deliver some schemes goes with that. That will

be the resource for the responsibility and the schemes. I am sure that when the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities took on additional responsibilities, they did so knowing that they would need additional support for those.

I have no plans, and I do not think that the Executive plan, to take responsibilities away from the Department for the Economy. We are facing into a very serious economic crisis, and the Department for the Economy will play a key and leading role in relation to all that. So, the Executive are trying to balance not only the funding available but the resources to make sure that we meet all the challenges that are ahead of us.

Ms S Bradley: Why have the Minister or the Executive still not produced any document that explains the strategy behind the COVID allocations?

Mr Murphy: The Executive produced a framework document to guide us in our discussions. That document is the property of the Executive Office. I am sure that, if the Member wishes it to be published, she can make that request to the Executive Office. I simply used it as a framework for the basis on which to make recommendations to the Executive for the distribution of money.

Mr Muir: You can already see that there will be quite a lot of demand for the funding pot from various sectors. At this point, I declare that I was previously an employee of Translink.

What discussions has the Minister had, and how far have those discussions progressed, with the Treasury about borrowing powers for revenue expenditure?

Mr Murphy: I will be making a statement to the House tomorrow morning with regard to ongoing work that we have done with Scotland and Wales in jointly pressing for financial flexibilities, so that is a very early discussion that we are having with the Treasury. We have become aware, only in the last week, that there will not be an autumn Budget from Whitehall. However, there is a comprehensive spending review, and we want to engage with that to get more certainty on the funding available to us and also to press home the arguments that we have been making for some time with regard to financial flexibilities.

Register of Public Interests

6. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the development of a register of public assets. (AQO 793/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials in Land and Property Services (LPS) have been engaging with all Departments to review their land and property asset data, with a view to collating, mapping and validating it. To date, good progress has been made in capturing the details of more than 900 Department for Communities sites, and the relevant asset information has been made public through a map-viewing tool on the Government's OpenDataNI website.

Work is also well under way to capture the detail of more than 7,000 assets from various Departments, and those will be made public in stages, beginning with buildings, with land assets at a later date. The validation of the assets of the Executive Office and the Department of Finance is

being undertaken at present, with the next public release of data expected around December of this year.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for his response. Does the Minister agree that having a register of public assets will allow the Executive to develop a strategy to provide a more efficient use of public assets and to reduce the costs of service delivery, which will assist our economic recovery?

Mr Murphy: Yes. I agree with that assessment. The Executive, through their Departments, own an enormous volume of assets, as do arm's-length bodies. We have huge pressures with regard to housing and finding land for housing, and rates are paid out of the public purse on many of those assets. Therefore, to achieve effectiveness, efficiency, savings and better outcomes, it is up to Departments to make a more effective use of the land and property that they own. I think that a central register of property assets linking together all the data related to each asset in a single, easily accessible database is a vital first step to realising those opportunities.

It is clear — this is with regard to an earlier question about a new means of working — that the Executive, Departments and arm's-length bodies will probably require less property and office space than they previously owned. It is important that we, centrally, have a sense of what that is and that it is publicly available so that people have opportunities to bid for it or offer to buy it or, indeed, that there are opportunities for community asset transfer, which I think will become increasingly important so that we are not sitting on and paying for land that could otherwise be put to good use.

Mr Frew: Given the public assets and the dilapidation claims when Departments leave a building, will the Minister commit to undertaking a survey into the grave discrepancies between what the landlord and the Department think that a dilapidation claim should be? Given the massive discrepancy between those two figures, will the Minister undertake to survey and assess that?

Mr Murphy: I am sure that we can. However, I assume that it is done on a case-by-case basis and that there is no overall formula for addressing it. It is not surprising that landlords and those who pay the rent have different views on what an asset is worth and what is required for the surrender of that asset.

The overarching work that we are doing on a register is to give us a sense of where all those properties are, what state they are in, what they are being used for, how much it is costing the public purse to maintain them, what needs there are in the community — should it be through community asset transfer — the intentions of private developers, and the need for land for housing, through the housing associations. All those things come into play, and we want to see the most efficient use of assets. That means making sure that what assets we have are used properly, that where they are not needed they are surrendered for better use, and that where we are paying for assets we get out of them in a way that is the most advantageous to the public purse.

Mr Allen: The Minister has rightly highlighted the use of public land for new house building and, indeed, his colleague, the Minister for Communities, has highlighted that she feels that the housing targets of the Department are abysmally low.

Will the Minister outline the engagement that he has had with housing providers on the availability of public land in order to meet a more ambitious housebuilding target?

Mr Murphy: I have engaged with the Minister and her senior team in the Department for Communities. I received a presentation from them on the Department's housing strategy and know that they want to look at a number of potential solutions to identifying more land. Some of that involves looking at the ability to vest land, but there are enormous tracts of publicly owned land and many buildings in city centres, towns and rural areas. Priorities have been set by the Executive, and housebuilding is one of them — it is not just a priority for the Department for Communities but an Executive priority — and, in the first instance, the public sector needs to make sure that all the work of the Executive goes towards supporting that. That means that if various other Departments are sitting on land banks that are of no use to them, those should be made available in order to meet that target.

I have had that engagement with the Department for Communities and received a presentation on its housing strategy. I want to make sure that the work that we are doing on compiling the register, making it accessible and pressing Departments for assessments of the assets that they own all contributes to the outcome that the Member has talked about.

Procurement Board

7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance to outline his plans to reconvene the Procurement Board. (AQO 794/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I plan to chair a meeting of the Procurement Board in November. Public procurement expenditure is approximately 25% of the Executive's Budget, and it is an important function to assist the local economy recover from the impact of COVID-19. I intend to ask the board to agree future strategic priorities for public procurement. Those will include an enhanced focus on social value, increased opportunities for small businesses and a strategy to deliver construction projects faster. There is also a need to review the governance structure for public procurement to ensure that the Executive achieve the best value for their expenditure.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire as do fhreagra. Minister, thank you for your reply. In addition to cost-effectiveness, I am sure that you will agree with me that it is important that those who are awarded those contracts and so on give priority to the protection of the environment, pay a living wage and improve social outcomes for all.

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member. That is becoming increasingly important, not just here but in other areas, such as in the South and in Britain, where the idea of social value in public procurement and the spending of public finances has become an increasingly important feature. We will look at the governance arrangements, but when the Procurement Board does its work, we will want to ensure that the ethos of social value is very much built into its policies so that there is a very clear understanding among those who want to tender for public contracts and provide public services that there is an expectation that the ethos of social value is very much part of what they will be asked to contribute.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister deliver a more centralised procurement agency that can lead on delivering major capital projects across Northern Ireland Departments, as was recommended by the Audit Office?

Mr Murphy: There is work to be done on ensuring that major projects are delivered on time. Of course, that takes in the responsibilities and remit of a range of Departments, and we want to ensure that every assistance that can be given to Departments is given to them. We are therefore looking at, if you like, the construct of the Procurement Board in order to make sure that it is as effective as it can possibly be. Policies that have been agreed by the Executive on public procurement then have to be bought into, supported and rolled out by all Departments.

We also have to ensure that a more effective approach is taken to major capital spends. Of course, procurement is not the only sector of a Department that contributes to that. As I said, a range of Departments does its own capital works, but we want to make sure that we get the best value for money. We are living in increasingly financially challenged times, so we have to ensure that all public spend is done as best and as efficiently as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call William Humphrey for a brief supplementary question.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister referred to reconvening the Procurement Board and its construct, but how will he populate the board? Will he assure the House that people from private companies will sit on it and that its membership will not just be drawn from the public sector and government?

Mr Murphy: I will be taking proposals to the Executive in the not-too-distant future.

I think that we want to ensure that people who have procurement expertise have a function. There is a heavy population on that board of almost ministerial representatives — senior officials acting on behalf of a Minister. What we want — I am not saying this in a derogatory way — is a more professional approach to procurement. The Executive should set policy for procurement, and we should ensure that people who have expertise can give guidance to help in the development of that policy. We are looking at a more radically changed approach to the Procurement Board, and I will bring propositions to the Executive in the not-too-distant future.

2.30 pm

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

Green Home Grant Scheme

T1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance whether the Northern Ireland Executive received additional Barnett formula funding from the Treasury as a result of the creation of the green home grant scheme, which was recently announced by the UK Treasury. (AQT 461/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am not aware of whether or not we have received additional Barnett funding. The concentration in recent times has been on getting the COVID Barnett allocations. I will make some enquiries in the Department and respond to the Member in writing.

Mr Easton: I am still slightly confused about this, because the Minister for Communities replied to a question for written answer that your Department had confirmed that there had been additional funding. That funding could be vital for jobs, so would you support such a scheme coming to Northern Ireland?

Mr Murphy: Yes, and, if it is the case that we have confirmed that to her, I am happy to reconfirm that in writing to you. I just want to make sure we have the detail correct in relation to what that Barnett funding amounts to. People see a large figure for an allocation in Britain and do not realise that we have a much smaller percentage of that, so it is to ensure that people are clear in relation to that.

I am in favour of environmental schemes and schemes that support a green economic recovery, as well as in general terms. Environmental schemes are hugely important to protect society, the ecology and the landscape, so I would support that. I look forward to any propositions from Departments on that.

Business Rates: Council Losses

T2. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Finance what assurances can be given that losses incurred by councils through the business rates holiday will be reimbursed. (AQT 462/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In the first instance, we have protected business rates. Even with the rates holiday that we proposed, we protected councils' intake, if you like, from that, so councils will not lose out over the four-month rates holiday for all businesses, extended to the end of the financial year, or the eight-month rates holiday for tourism, hospitality, leisure and retail. We ensured that the cost of that was borne by the Executive from the COVID money that we received, so councils do not take a hit. As a matter of fact, they are probably in a better position because, undoubtedly, some businesses would have gone out of business without that intervention and councils would have lost the rates from those businesses completely, so they are in a better position.

We have, over the course of COVID allocations, made funding available. No later than the last COVID allocation, which I announced, I think, last week in the House, there was a contribution to councils to cover economic recovery activity that they are involved in but also some of the associated costs for those councils.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for that explanation. It was very useful. Does he have any idea at this stage of how much financial help local government has received from the Executive?

Mr Murphy: I can get the Member the full amount, because there have been a number of allocations over the past few months. I am trying to think whether the latest one was for £20 million or £40 million, but we did make an allocation. It is not all that the councils have asked for or that the Department for Communities has asked for in relation to councils. We always get more bids than funding is available for, so we have to cut our cloth accordingly. I can get the figure for the total allocation to councils since the pandemic came upon us and provide it to the Member.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Fra McCann is not in his place.

Financial Support: Businesses in Derry and Strabane

T4. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the financial support available for businesses that have been forced to close in the Derry and Strabane owing to the additional restrictions that have been imposed, with businesses already closing down because they cannot continue to function. (AQT 464/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I signalled to the Executive last Thursday that I had already asked for work to be undertaken in the Department on that, and I made a presentation to this morning's Executive meeting on options to provide support. We want to ensure that businesses that have been forced to close and have been most directly affected by the additional restrictions that have been put in place can receive some support as quickly as possible, that it is not overly bureaucratic, that it gets quickly to the businesses that need it and that it supports the ongoing costs that they will have. Clearly, this is a very challenging time for all businesses across the North, not just in the north-west, but, obviously, there are additional restrictions on hospitality businesses there.

I intend to bring a paper, and we have to work with the Department for Communities because that Department will pay out the assistance. The Department of Finance, through LPS, works to ensure that we can try to devise a scheme that is effective, that gets quickly to the businesses that need it and that has a rapid turnaround. When those proposals are developed, I will seek Executive approval for them in conjunction with the Department for the Economy, and hopefully we will get support onto the ground as quickly as we can.

Mr McHugh: I know that you have already been involved in lobbying the Chancellor on furlough and so on. Will you continue lobbying for much-needed resources and a financial package, particularly for the north-west, given the situation that that region finds itself in?

Mr Murphy: People can re-furlough over the rest of this month. I regret that the scheme is coming to an end at the end of this month, and, as I have said many times, I do not think that the scheme that will be put in its place will meet the same targets and outcomes that the original furlough scheme did. If employees are not able to go to work over the next two to three weeks, they can avail themselves of the furlough scheme again.

The package of support that we have is for those who are most directly affected by this, such as those who have to close. I recognise that, in broader terms, the north-west needs much more in economic packages for regeneration, and that is why the money that we are investing in city deals is very important to the north-west. This is specifically about trying to target businesses that have been impacted by the restrictions. It is to ensure that we give them some assistance with their ongoing costs. Hopefully, when the restrictions can be lifted, they can get back into more productive business again.

COVID-19: Economic Support

T5. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on when economic support for sectors that have not yet benefited from COVID-19 relief will be announced. (AQT 465/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I hope that that will be as soon as possible. As I said, I spoke to some ministerial colleagues on Thursday, on the side of the Executive meeting, and I asked for, as quickly as possible, indicative figures because I knew not only that we were dealing the sectors that had not yet had their needs addressed but that, on Thursday, the discussion was coming around to further restrictions and the ongoing support needed, particularly for businesses in the Derry and Strabane areas. You recognise that there are more pressures coming from another angle, so the quicker we can have figures on the sectors that have been readily identified, the quicker the Executive will have a clear sense of what finances they have to play with. I am hopeful that they will come very soon. It is obviously up to the Department that is dealing with them to bring those forward, and the sooner we get them, the better the position the Executive will be in to offer the support that is needed.

Mr Harvey: Has the Minister had discussion with Her Majesty's Treasury on further assistance to support those sectors?

Mr Murphy: We have had discussion on ongoing support that the Treasury has directly provided: the furlough scheme, the loan schemes and the support for the self-employed. We have had ongoing discussion on that, and the actual allocation for business support is to come out of the COVID money that we got as a Barnett consequential from Treasury. It is not that we have been in dialogue with them about support for those sectors. We will be in dialogue with them if we face further restrictions, and that is the purpose of the meeting that I have sought urgently today. If we go into further restrictions, there will be a need for further interventions from Whitehall, and that is the sort of dialogue that we will have, hopefully in the near future.

Rateable Value: Business Support

T6. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Finance whether he is happy enough, following the review of the previous business support scheme, that rateable value is an accurate and equitable basis on which to allocate business support. (AQT 466/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am always careful to use the term "happy" about things. Generally, with finances, we are never happy, but, if we are satisfied, it is a good start.

I want to commend LPS staff for the work that they did. Recently, I had discussions with them. People worked seven days a week to get that scheme turned around and support out on the ground very quickly. I am sure that, as with many sections of government, Departments and parts of Departments, people will have their criticisms. However, that scheme was delivered in a way in which probably no other previous scheme had been delivered in the history of the Civil Service, with a rapid turnaround.

LPS had the information and data to ensure that we knew where businesses were, who was entitled to the small business rate relief scheme and who was paying business rates, and it got that support out very quickly. It was done with well over 90% accuracy. That would be very effective even if the scheme had taken weeks or months to deliver, but it was turned around in days and weeks. Therefore, it was a very accurate way in which to do it. Through it, the Executive managed to get support out on the ground very quickly. Had we started to set up a scheme that required

a lot of applications and verifications, many of those businesses would have gone out of business by the time that we got support to them. I commend very much the staff in LPS who were involved in that work. They worked tirelessly and dealt with a range of appeals. I can take only the feedback that I get from elected representatives. By and large, it has been very positive.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. I hope that I did not sound unhappy with the previous scheme, because that was not my intention. However, there is always room for improvement. On the back of Mr Harvey's question, can the Minister confirm whether any particular sectors that did not benefit from the previous scheme might, now, benefit? Does he think that taking a sectoral approach rather than using the rating system might have some merit?

Mr Murphy: Undoubtedly. I am not saying that everything was 100% foolproof. However, we were tasked with delivering support to businesses in as fast a fashion as we could possibly do it. That was the most accurate data that we had on who is in business and paying business rates, so that is the scheme that was used. I am sure that there are other sectors. Of course, that immediately points up people who do not have their own premises, work in shared premises, work from home or are self-employed; all those sectors. However, that required a set of data that probably would have had to come from HMRC. It would have been much more difficult to access and not possible for us to verify here because we do not have that data.

Any scheme that we used would always have had its downside. The scheme that we used got money out rapidly. Since then, we have been trying to find ways in which to address the sectors that missed out. The complexity of doing that is shown by the fact that it is taking so long to try to achieve that.

Financial Assistance: Councils

T7. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Finance to assure the House that when he guarantees the resources for any scheme that is provided for the north-west, including the Derry and Strabane council area, he will also guarantee the same scheme to be applied to other council areas or, indeed, across Northern Ireland if that becomes necessary. (AQT 467/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My presentation to the Executive this morning outlined that not only does the scheme need to be fit for purpose in order to try to get it on the ground quickly to address the ongoing costs to businesses that have had to close down but, because it might last for a longer time, it has to be extendable — we had to have a proposal built into it that it could be extended — and it has to be transferable, so that the same scheme that would apply in the north-west could transfer to other council areas where that need might arise. Hopefully, it will not arise elsewhere, but, given the increase in the spread of the virus right across the North, there is a distinct possibility that it will. Therefore, that was part of the proposition that I put to the Executive this morning; that it be a transferable scheme.

Mr Givan: Can the Minister advise whether the funding of the scheme is wholly dependent on Treasury's providing it, resources will be made available by other Departments surrendering money, or the Executive are considering borrowing to pay for it?

Mr Murphy: In the first instance, it will come from what is left in the COVID pot. As I said, the sooner that we have accurate figures on sectors that have been left out, the better. As it stands, the scheme is for two weeks and a limited number of businesses in the overall number across the North. Therefore, as I said, it will come from the COVID pot in the first instance. If we get into much wider geographical restrictions or restrictions across the entire Six Counties, that is a conversation that we will need to have with Treasury. That is why I want to begin that dialogue with the Chancellor. In the first instance, we will address it from what is left in the pot of COVID money.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Matthew O'Toole for a quick question before we run out of time.

Head of the Civil Service: Vacancy

T8. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Finance, given that his Department is critical to their delivery, how any of the following can be achieved without there being a head of the Civil Service in place: the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment to Civil Service reform, including reviews of the procurement and appointment processes, public appointments and the arm's-length bodies, as well as a series of reforms that came out of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry report. (AQT 468/17-22)

2.45 pm

Mr Murphy: We can achieve those, although it is not ideal, and I would prefer that there were a head of the Civil Service, but my Department is responsible for bringing forward proposals, and we are working on all the areas that the Member outlined. I could go into more detail, but we are restricted time-wise. I assure the Member that we are working on all those areas. We will bring forward position papers to the Executive, and it is for the Executive to agree them.

When it gets to the implementation phase, of course, leadership across the Civil Service will be required. Hopefully, by that stage, the issue will have been addressed. I want to assure the Member that the absence of a head of the Civil Service will not delay me or my Department from bringing forward the necessary proposals.

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

Health

Hospital Visiting: COVID-19 Restrictions

1. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Health what action he will take to ensure that COVID-19 restrictions on visiting hospitals do not prevent families from saying goodbye to loved ones at the end of their lives. (AQO 803/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): On 23 September, my Department updated the visiting guidance following a review of the regional alert level. The new guidance revises the principles for visiting, which apply across all healthcare settings during the COVID-19 pandemic and will be reviewed, based on evolving evidence. The visiting guidance has been informed by the Department of Health's

COVID-19 guidance on the ethical advice and support framework, which recognises that some patients will be cared for in contexts where recovery is not expected, including in hospitals. The decisions to permit visitors into facilities on a day-to-day basis will lie with the person in charge. That will be based on a risk assessment and rely on the ability to ensure social distancing and the safety of patient or resident and the visitor.

In all circumstances, the intention is that each individual should receive personalised and compassionate care, including the appropriate palliative treatment. The pandemic situation exacerbates difficulties in palliative care situations due to the physical distancing regulations that prevent or limit family visiting. However, all efforts should be made to allow at least one family member to be present with their dying relative in all care settings where possible. I recognise that the application of those measures does not allow the level of visiting, contact or support that we would like to facilitate, but my main priority continues to be the reduction of the risk of COVID-19 transmission across all healthcare settings and prevent further outbreaks as far as possible.

Ms Bunting: I am referring, of course, to circumstances in which the immediate family are normally called in. The Minister will know just how important it is that individual family members get the opportunity to say their final farewells. In some places, that has been reduced to one person, and, in others, it has been reduced to none at all. Given that it is the ward manager who decides, the position is not consistent in individual hospitals, never mind across trusts. Will the Minister urgently move to rectify that most cruel practice, because it is leaving families further scarred? No one should die alone.

Mr Swann: I accept the Member's point, which is why we issued the regional guidance. I do not recognise the situation in which no one is allowed to be with a dying family member. If that is happening, I hope that the Member will give me the details, because I do not recognise such a situation. The guidance states that one family member is allowed to be present, and it is up to the ward manager, the nurse in charge or the manager of the care home to make sure that that happens safely. I will look into the specific case that the Member mentions.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, you are quite right to try to enable as many people as possible to say their goodbyes, but we also have a duty to the staff to ensure that they are not suffering verbal abuse as a consequence of giving bad news, in more than one sense. In the decision-making process, what measures are being put in place to protect staff?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Her point is very valid, and members from the trade union side have raised with me how staff are being portrayed as callous in this situation, even though the guidance was developed by health professionals and is recognised across a number of jurisdictions. It is being done to ensure that visitors, carers and hospital staff are kept as safe as possible in very trying times. We do not want to do this. My Chief Nursing Officer and her advisory team do not want to do it, and the staff in those settings certainly do not want to do it, because it places an increased burden on them as well. I have heard many testimonies, as, I am sure, the Member has, about the end-of-life care that the staff across all health settings have given. We must ensure that nobody

dies alone, and, through the dedication of our healthcare system and the professionals in it, we will ensure that that does not happen.

Mr Chambers: I recognise that this will have been a difficult issue for his Department to consider. Can he confirm that any decision on visiting policy is especially informed by the opinions of his chief professional officers as well as by the clinicians and front-line workers in our hospitals?

Mr Swann: I can give the Member that reassurance, as I did to the Health Committee. They contribute to this decision-making process not only through their professional nature but through their human input and their caring side. As I have said, this decision is not an easy one, but it is one that is there to ensure the safety of those visiting and of those who have to facilitate their visiting.

Mr Allister: I draw the Minister's attention to not just the end-of-life situation but to the situation when newborns arrive. Surely the present restrictions on fathers are far too severe. They are admitted for the birth, pass through all the COVID protections and then summarily shown the door, effectively, and not allowed to see the newborn or the mother until they are released from hospital. Surely there needs to more flexibility.

Mr Swann: Again, that is not an easy one, and the Member will know that. The guidance is based on the best scientific advice available at any given stage. Northern Ireland is currently at surge level 4 when it comes to our visiting regulations, and those state that, in maternity settings:

"Birth partner will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour ... and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week."

The day-to-day decision to permit visitors to a facility will still lie with the nurses in charge. It will be based on a risk assessment and will rely on the ability to ensure social distancing and the safety of patients and visitors.

This is not the experience that I want for expectant mothers, and I recognise that it is a very anxious time for all families. Many difficult requests have been made, and will continue to be made, of the public in all aspects of health service provision in order to reduce the spread of infection and to protect expectant mothers, their families and the staff who provide that care.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that question 6 has been withdrawn.

Influenza Immunisation Programme

2. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of how effective the forthcoming influenza immunisation programme is in covering all strains of influenza. (AQO 804/17-22)

Mr Swann: Each of the seasonal influenza vaccines used in Northern Ireland provides protection against the three or four influenza viruses that have been identified by the World Health Organization as the viruses most likely to cause significant disease that year. The vaccine will provide protection only against those viruses. Factors such

as a person's age and health will affect their response to the vaccine given and therefore influence the vaccine's effectiveness in preventing flu. Vaccine effectiveness is reported across the UK and included in each annual national flu report, which can be found online. Vaccine effectiveness can vary between population groups and according to the strain of virus covered by that vaccine as well as the closeness of the match between the vaccine and the strain of flu. The flu vaccine is the best protection against flu for our population.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that the call went out for everyone to be immunised with the flu jab, I ask the Minister if he is confident that the most vulnerable who get the flu jab every year will be able to access it this year?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point, and I thank him for reiterating it. We have been clear that having the flu and COVID-19 at the same time increases the extreme risk to the patient. The groups that are entitled to the flu vaccine will be contacted by their health professionals. In keeping with the advice, the eligible population groups for flu vaccination in Northern Ireland are as follows: primary school children; anyone who is at increased risk of serious illness from flu due to an underlying medical condition; pregnant women; residents of residential or nursing homes; main carers for an elderly or disabled person; front-line health and social care workers, including those working in care homes; and those aged 65 and over. The amount of vaccine that we acquired has been increased on the normal standardisation for the year. One of the most important things that we are doing is asking anyone who is eligible for the flu vaccine to come forward and get it because it protects them and it helps us to fight COVID-19 at the same time.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, on that point, the additional category for those eligible for the flu vaccine now includes those who live with people who received shielding letters. Are you assured that there are enough doses?

Mr Swann: We have purchased extra doses of the flu vaccine. As we expand, each category is only expanded to match the availability of the doses that we have. If we have extra capacity, we will be expanding the eligibility of those groups that can get it. I am assured by my health professionals that there is enough flu vaccine this year to meet the demands of those who we are asking to come forward. However, should we get additional supplies, we will be increasing availability to those who are due to access, or who can access, the flu vaccine.

Ms S Bradley: Minister, given that you are confident that there should be enough vaccine, have you had any conversations with pharmacies about whether they can offer capacity to deliver flu jabs this year?

Mr Swann: Our community pharmacy partners in the health service do deliver the flu vaccine for those who want to come forward and pay for it. They can provide it, as can our GP services. It is about getting as many eligible people not just to receive it but also to give it. There is a large piece of work going on across the health and social care system on peer vaccinators so that we can increase the pool of people who can give the vaccine, and our community pharmacy partners are part of that pool.

COVID-19: Testing for Care Workers

3. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Health why routine testing of community-based care workers providing daily care to the elderly is not taking place in the same way as is required for residential care home workers. (AQO 805/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. The current general policy is that all staff who are symptomatic or who are isolating as a symptomatic household member are eligible for testing in Northern Ireland. That includes community-based domiciliary care providers who, as essential healthcare workers, can access testing, either through the HSC laboratories or via the national testing programme. Should there be an indication of more than one symptomatic individual among a group of care workers, an appropriate risk assessment will be undertaken by the Public Health Agency, with testing of all individuals undertaken as deemed appropriate by that risk assessment.

The priority groups eligible for testing are kept under constant review by my Department's expert advisory group for testing and are updated regularly in line with the emerging scientific and medical evidence as the pandemic continues to evolve. The position with regard to the appropriate frequency of testing of domiciliary care workers is kept under active review by that expert group.

Ms Bailey: Thank you, Minister. I am in contact with one of my constituents whose mother receives domiciliary care and who has now tested positive for COVID-19 and is in acute care. We have heard, informally, that up to three domiciliary carers who have attended that client have tested positive.

To date, there has been no formal contact from the care companies involved or from the track and trace system. Does the Minister feel that that is good enough for protecting our vulnerable people? Will he commit to ensuring that better systems and protections are put in place immediately?

3.00 pm

Mr Swann: I am concerned to hear about the specific case that the Member raises. It is not something that I recognise or that I want my testing system or the test, trace and protect system to do. Again, not wanting to comment on an individual case, if the Member wants to provide me with the name and address of her constituent and the care company, I will make sure that this is followed up on and that the Public Health Agency gets in contact with the company, because there is a duty of care that the care company should act on.

Mr Gildernew: Minister, given how vital healthcare workers are to dealing with the pandemic, what plans do you or your Department have to expand testing to all staff and not just to test those who are symptomatic?

Mr Swann: A large piece of work has been done on who is eligible and on when we should be doing a regular testing programme. The Member knows full well that one of the first cohorts for which regular repeat testing has been put in place is our care home staff and residents. We have seen, through expert advice and guidance and scientific advice and guidance, that that is the cohort that needs regular testing so that we can protect residents

of care homes. When we look at where we are with the number of care homes showing positive cases, we see that that approach has been effective in ensuring that we are keeping care home infections as low as possible. The expert advisory group regularly looks at who should be tested and at when they should be tested. The regular testing programme makes a positive contribution to the entire healthcare service and to how we fight the pandemic. It is kept under regular review by that group.

Mrs Cameron: Minister, is your Department looking at the possibility of pooling testing? We heard an example of that in the Health Committee recently from a professor in Hong Kong.

Mr Swann: I am not sure what you mean. Did you say "pooling" or "pulling"?

Mrs Cameron: Multiple testing.

Mr Swann: That is an approach that was advanced in Germany at the very beginning of the pandemic, where 10 people were tested and put into the one sample. If the sample tested positive, the 10 were tested again. There were queries over the efficiency of that process, because the 10 people had to wait on the first result before being called for the second test to be done, and they then had to wait for that result. It therefore delayed one of the 10 people in that pool being identified as being positive. It is not something that we did in the first pandemic, and it is not something that we are considering doing this time either.

COVID-19: Shielding Guidance

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health for an update on shielding guidance for people at the greatest risk from COVID-19. (AQO 806/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I recognise that this is a difficult and worrying time, particularly for those who may have an underlying condition that means that they are more clinically vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19. Members will be aware that new restrictions came into force across Northern Ireland from 22 September. Those new regulations do not constitute a lockdown, but their overriding goal is to keep household-to-household contact as low as possible in order to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

The need for further specific advice for those who were previously shielding is being kept under continuous review. At this time, however, there has been no change to the decision to pause shielding, which came into effect from 1 August. I know that some of those who were previously shielding are relieved that there has not been a return to the advice to stay at home at all times. I recognise that, for others, the pause in shielding has been difficult to navigate and has brought with it new uncertainties, which, when combined with the rising numbers of COVID-19 cases in the community, has led to a sense of increased anxiety. There is no easy route through the current difficulties that we all face, but it is important that we continue to seek to achieve as balanced an approach as possible.

There is always a degree of risk in contact with the outside world, but remaining indoors indefinitely is also detrimental to physical and mental health. I therefore encourage clinically vulnerable people and older people to be particularly careful in following the advice on limiting

household contacts, social distancing, handwashing and wearing a face covering. However, I also ask everyone in our community to play their part in keeping each other safe. At this difficult time, it remains more important than ever that we stick together, stringently follow the public health advice and adhere to the new regulations.

Mr Boylan: The Minister is well aware that thousands of people had to shield, and they are now concerned about the rising number of positive cases. What reassurance can he give to people who have had to shield and may have to shield again? If they do, what support will he put in place for them?

Mr Swann: Again, the Member makes a valid point. Work was commissioned and carried out by the Patient and Client Council (PCC) on the experiences of the first cohort that had to shield. That is where that part of my answer comes from. There are those in that cohort who do not want to shield again, and there are those who do. That is why, at this point, we are looking at a further risk matrix, should we have to provide a second piece of guidance about who should shield. It will be a much smaller cohort who have to shield for very specific medical reasons, and that will be supported by guidance from the Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) from across the four nations.

With regard to support mechanisms, when we ask someone to shield, it is important that we have the support, not just from the community, which has been invaluable in the first cohort of shielding, be it local community groups, the GAA or Orange lodges. That first cohort who shielded were well looked after by their community. We need to ensure that those groups have the ability to do that again. I have been in contact with the Member's colleague the Minister for Communities to ensure that that support is financially and physically supported as well. It is crucial that we provide an infrastructure to support people if we ask them to shield for a second time.

Mr Givan: Can the Minister elaborate on which criteria will trigger letters being sent with guidance on shielding? Will it be the same criteria that were used in the first instance? Can he assure us that the support package will be in place before the measures are taken?

Mr Swann: Following on from the answer that I have already given, the four CMOs are looking at a risk matrix that will assess what we have learned from the first cohort, specifically in regard to what medical conditions and underlying medical conditions are more vulnerable to the worst effects of COVID-19. What we have seen, coming into this period and from the learnings from the first part, is that a number of the groups with medical conditions who were asked to shield were not adversely affected by COVID. It is about keeping as many people not shielded as is physically possible.

With regard to support mechanisms, the Member is correct: if we as a Government and as an Executive ask someone to shield, we have to make sure that the support mechanisms are there. As I say, that is why I have been engaging with the Department for Communities and the Department of Finance to make sure that there is a holistic package. Community Pharmacy did vital work during the first period of shielding by setting up a delivery mechanism for those who needed prescriptions. A lot of community volunteers were used to deliver that. It is about making

sure that all the support mechanisms are in place before we take the second step.

Ms Hunter: How does the Minister plan to support the most vulnerable in our society, who may be shielding and struggling with mental illness, if they are based in rural communities and do not have access to the internet when seeking support?

Mr Swann: I know that the Member has raised before the issue of the mental health challenges for people who have been asked to shield. Again, through my engagement with Community Pharmacy when they looked at working with delivering prescriptions, I know that one of the things that its volunteers said was that it was not the time to deliver the prescription that was the most vital; it was the engagement at the door, where they actually had face-to-face interaction. That is one of the challenges. Just to correct the Member, there is no one shielding at the minute. We have not advised anybody to do that. However, it is about making sure that there is community support and engagement with people. In the rural communities, the work of Rural Support and the Good Morning telephone lines, such as Good Morning Ballymena and Good Morning Ballycastle, that operate across Northern Ireland is important. As I said when answering the previous Member, community organisations such as Orange lodges and the GAA provide community cohesion and additional support. They really stepped up with additional support and engaged to make sure that no one was left all alone. Making sure that no one feels abandoned is one of the largest challenges. That was something that came out of the Patient and Client Council research with the initial shielding group. The research said that it was vital for a person who was shielding to have someone to talk to. It is important that, when we ask someone to shield again, they have support mechanisms such as a voice at the end of the phone or on the other side of the door, and they have someone to support them.

Reshaping Stroke Care

5. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Health for an update on Reshaping Stroke Care. (AQO 807/17-22)

Mr Swann: As a consequence of the need to prioritise the response to the coronavirus pandemic over the past few months, work on a range of projects, including Reshaping Stroke Care, has been paused. While I believe that that was the right thing to do, I appreciate the wider impact that it will have had on stroke patients across Northern Ireland. I can assure you that Reshaping Stroke Care remains a key priority, and I recognise the urgent need for the reform of stroke services in Northern Ireland. Over 19,000 people responded to the consultation on Reshaping Stroke Care, and my officials have completed an analysis of responses. I have asked for some further analysis to be undertaken regarding the staffing requirements for the hyper-acute stroke network proposed in the consultation, and that work is currently under way. I intend to consider that analysis alongside the consultation analysis and the evidence base for reform in reaching my decision, and I will update the House accordingly.

Mr Lunn: The Minister has referred to the increasing pressures caused by the resurgence of COVID-19, and there is some dreadful news coming from across the border today about a situation that may spill over into our

jurisdiction. Can he assure us that, given the importance of the stroke service, the realignment will not be unduly set aside as a result of the pressures of COVID-19?

Mr Swann: I assure the Member that it will not be set aside, but I also assure him that it will not be rushed as this is a once-in-a-generation decision to change how we support those who have had a stroke and those who need aftercare following a stroke. I will decide in due time with due process, and I will make sure that I consider the additional information I have sought from my Department and the responses from the consultation.

Ms Dolan: Minister, you referred to the fact that you have asked for further analysis to be undertaken on staffing for the reshaping of stroke care. Can you clarify what that further analysis is examining and the time frame for its completion?

Mr Swann: As I said in my recent answer, this is a once-in-a-generation chance to improve stroke services and deliver improved outcomes. For that reason, I am not prepared to rush into a decision without access to all the information. That information is needed to make the right decision. I make no apology for seeking further analysis of the options outlined as to where and at what level stroke services will be delivered in Northern Ireland, and it will have an impact on staff. If we make any changes to what that future stroke service may look like, I need to make sure that we have the staff to deliver it. There is no point in coming out with recommendations if we do not have the ability to deliver the work we need it to do on the ground.

Ms Bunting: The Minister knows that time is of the essence with stroke care. On that basis, will he confirm that stroke services in the Ulster Hospital are being protected for people in the east of the Province, including east Belfast, north Down, Ards and Comber? The extra distance to the other side of Belfast could prove detrimental to their prognosis.

Mr Swann: Again, as I have said, no decision has been made on the location where our stroke services will be reconfigured, should they need to be reconfigured. The Sentinel Stroke National Audit Programme (SSNAP), which assesses the delivery of stroke services, happened between January and March of this year.

Three stroke units in Northern Ireland achieved an A grade and four units received a B grade, which is a significant improvement on six months ago when only two stroke units achieved an A grade and two units achieved a B grade. The delivery of care is currently at a very high standard and that has been assessed and accredited by the SSNAP audit. Our current provision is fit for purpose and supports our patients. As I said, the review will be done in the time that it takes for me to come to the right decision that ensures the future-proofing of stroke services in Northern Ireland.

3.15 pm

COVID-19: Mental Health Provision

7. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Health, in the light of continued COVID-19 restrictions, what measures he is taking to increase support for mental health provision. (AQO 809/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. It is accepted that the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, lockdown and other restrictions, will have a negative impact on our population's mental well-being. At the start of the pandemic, I put arrangements in place to mitigate and address that impact. When I published the mental health action plan on 19 May, I included a dedicated COVID-19 mental health response plan. That plan set out the mental health response to the pandemic and outlined specific actions, including public health messaging to support people to look after their mental well-being while staying at home and the provision of updated mental health support and advice on the mindingyourhead.info website. It included the development of an online app library to support self-help, the roll-out of psychological first aid training to staff and volunteers on the front line and the provision of free online stress control classes, which have been available since May and will continue to be available until the end of the year. It also included bereavement guidance and a workforce well-being framework and dedicated psychological helplines for front-line staff.

That support remains in place as we continue to battle COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic on our community's mental health. A key element of responding to the emerging mental health need is the implementation of the mental health action plan, which includes the development of a new mental health strategy. That gives us an opportunity to build on our mental health response to the pandemic and build that into a 10-year strategic plan with a substantial evidence base. We can reinvigorate and reorganise services to better reflect the new and emerging profile of need, and we can build on innovative solutions that have come to the fore during this period.

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

COVID-19: Barriers to North/South Cooperation

T1. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Health for an assessment of the barriers to North/South cooperation that have been revealed by the COVID-19 response. (AQT 471/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. There are no barriers that spring to mind apart from, at times, the challenges of communication. That has come about because of political decision-making on either side of the border. We have had challenges around the transfer of information on travel locator forms, on which we are currently receiving legal advice. The Member's junior Minister, Declan Kearney, and I attended the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in health format on Friday at which a number of those issues were addressed. I can assure the Member that there is no deliberate barrier to sharing information or to how we respond to COVID-19. There are technical and legal difficulties that we are working, on both sides of the border, to address as soon as we possibly and practically can.

Ms Anderson: The Minister is aware that a memorandum of understanding was signed, but we know that it is not operable. Ireland is a single epidemiological unit and COVID-19 is spreading, particularly in Derry and Strabane,

where there have been 804 cases over the last seven days. Does the Minister concur that there is a need for primary legislation to address those issues?

Mr Swann: I do not recognise what the Member says about the memorandum of understanding not being operable. I think that it works. We have challenges, which we are addressing on either side of the border. They are not political or personal; they are operational with regard to legislation and the sharing of personal data. That is coming from the respective AGs, and it is being worked on at the moment. Primary legislation would need to be conjunctive and coherent on both sides of the border at the same time. We are not there yet, and we do not need it; there are good working relationships between me and the Health Minister in the Republic of Ireland, our CMOs and our public health agencies, which we can build on and improve. Legislation is not the answer.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Patsy McGlone is not in his place.

Abortion Services: Northern Trust

T3. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Health what advice he would give to women in his constituency to assist them in accessing medical abortion services given that, as she noticed with some bemusement, his Department issued a statement last week that warned women not to take abortion pills at home and that, although early medical abortion pathways were put in place by trusts in April 2020 to facilitate women, the Northern Trust announced on Friday that it can no longer sustain that voluntary service. (AQT 473/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has not given instructions to the Health and Social Care Board to commission abortion services. However, abortion is now legal and can be carried out by registered medical professionals. I will not comment on the locations in trusts where abortions have been carried out. The Member will be aware that I have sought Executive agreement on the establishment of an emergency early medical abortion service to ensure that women's health needs are addressed during this pandemic.

Ms Bailey: The abortion regulations were laid before Parliament and came into force in March. They provide, as the Minister said, the new legal basis for medical professionals in Northern Ireland to terminate pregnancies lawfully. Will the Minister tell the House the other lawful medical services for which his Department has refused to provide funding or resource?

Mr Swann: The Member is being deliberately obtuse in her supplementary question. The 2020 abortion regulations came into force on 31 March. They set out the circumstances in which an abortion may take place and establish the requirement for terminations to be certified by a registered medical professional and notified to the Chief Medical Officer. As terminations are carried out outside any normal commissioning arrangements, there is currently no agreed protocol for processing notifications of termination. They contain sensitive personal information. To date, they have been counted, but, otherwise, unprocessed. The Member is aware of that and the services that are provided across a number of other trusts in Northern Ireland.

COVID-19: GAA Match, Bellaghy

T4. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health what concerns, in seeking to control the spread of the virus, he has about the aftermath of the outrageous and blatant breach of the COVID regulations at the GAA match in Bellaghy at the weekend, where there was no adherence to social distancing and no respect or regard for the regulations, which were treated with utter contempt. (AQT 474/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Member raises concerns that have been widely publicised. The images were brought to my attention over the weekend, and I was disappointed and angry to see them. If one person in that group or community has COVID-19, there is every chance that it has now spread among the group. However, that is not restricted to the group that we saw at the GAA match; it is the same for any group that we see being portrayed on social media, whether in a bar setting or a university hostel, where social distancing is not being observed. I was disappointed and angry at what we witnessed and what the Member refers to. I note, however, that the GAA has suspended all games and expressed disappointment at what it classifies as after-game actions. It claims that those are beyond its control, but I would have liked to see a more stringent application of the guidance that was already in place.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. That is not the first such incident that we have witnessed; indeed, only two weeks ago, my colleague Keith Buchanan raised a similar incident with you in the House. Do you agree that, although the GAA has now put some sanctions in place, it is a matter of closing the stable door after the horse has bolted? The players and supporters may well be guilty of passing on the virus to some vulnerable people in our society —

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

Mr T Buchanan: — who, as a result, will lose their life.

Mr Swann: When we put regulations and guidance in place, they are there for a reason: to prevent the unnecessary spread of COVID-19. When I see the examples that were shared widely on social media over the weekend and what has happened in other situations, it concerns me. The Member is right: more often than not, someone from such crowds ends up in a hospital setting, which puts pressure on our hospital services, our nurses and our doctors. There has to be some recognition that our regulations and guidance are put in place to prevent hospitalisations, to prevent people entering ICUs and to prevent deaths. It is a clear message that comes from the Executive collectively: our guidance is there for a reason.

If there have been breaches of the rules and regulations, I encourage the PSNI to investigate all available media, including social media, no matter the situation or scenario. It may take enforcement to get the message through to that small minority of people who think that they are either above these regulations or immune to COVID-19. Unfortunately, we are at that point, and that is why I welcome the establishment of the compliance and enforcement group within the Executive and support the work that it is doing.

COVID-19: SAI Investigations

T5. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health whether the serious adverse incident (SAI) investigations into the COVID-19 outbreaks at Craigavon Area Hospital and Daisy Hill Hospital have begun. (AQT 475/17-22)

Mr Swann: I do not have the specific update to hand but I will get back to the Member. I know that the panel has been appointed for the SAI that is ongoing at level 3. I have given assurances to the investigating team and reassurances to the families — I have met one of the families — that the panel will have the ability to set up its own terms of reference, with input from the families, and there will be no restriction of access to information or whatever the panel needs once it has been commissioned and is up and running.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you for that information, Minister. Since the start of September, 22 hospital deaths have been reported. I hate going into statistics but this is important: 12 of those 22 are associated with the outbreaks in Daisy Hill and Craigavon, meaning that 54% of all recorded hospital deaths are associated with those outbreaks. Surely, Minister, those investigations should be ongoing and the findings used to protect hospital staff, patients and visitors.

Mr Swann: A point that the Member has made various times is that we do not wait for the outcomes of the SAI. Learning from what happened in the Southern Trust is live and ongoing. I welcome the input, advice and guidance from Public Health England (PHE) as well. Rather than just the Southern Trust learning from PHE's experience of outbreaks across hospitals in England and Wales, that learning could be shared across all our trusts here in Northern Ireland so that we do not witness the terrible loss of life that we have seen in Craigavon Area Hospital and Daisy Hill.

StopCOVID NI App: Update

T7. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the COVID proximity app and to state how many exposure notifications have been issued. (AQT 477/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. At the end of last week, we launched the app for under-18s. To date, the COVID app has been downloaded over 411,000 times. It has sent out 8,500 text messages. Nearly 2,000 app users have received positive messages from uploading the diagnosis key, and 5,722 app users have received exposure notifications and been informed to self-isolate. That shows that our app has been beneficial in contacting people who may not have known that they were in contact with somebody who later tested positive for COVID.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister very much for his answer. How is the app working on both sides of the border?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. As he and the House know, our app was the first to operate cross-border and in two different jurisdictions. How well it was working was discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on Friday. To date, we have received anonymous keys from the Republic of Ireland relating to 1,471 cases, and our app has sent 1,355 cases to the Republic of Ireland, anonymously. Therefore, 2,700 people have been identified on either side of the border because

of the interoperability of the app that we produced in conjunction with the Republic of Ireland.

3.30 pm

Face Coverings: Enforcement

T8. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health who, in his opinion, is responsible for enforcing the wearing of face coverings in the retail sector. (AQT 478/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Member will know that who can enforce and who should enforce is quite a contentious issue. In my opinion, the rule is set down in regulations, so it is, ultimately, up to the PSNI to deliver that responsibly. However, I encourage all retail providers and all shop owners to actively encourage people to wear face coverings. I know that there is a more proactive approach now that have we have seen additional restrictions being put in place in the north-west. I have seen some of our major supermarkets taking a more proactive approach to encouraging people to wear face coverings in the retail sector. Bus and train drivers and conductors have also been encouraging people on public transport to use them. The Executive need to engage with a piece of work about the use of face coverings and their benefits, especially as we are now seeing increased transmission of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of questions to the Minister of Health. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Economy

Mr Speaker: Gary Middleton has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for the Economy. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

Support for Businesses in the North-west

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for the Economy what her Department, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, is doing to provide immediate and targeted financial support to businesses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area directly impacted by the additional COVID-19 restrictions effective from 5 October 2020.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank my colleague for his question on this very important topic.

The decision by the Executive to apply restrictions in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area simply reinforces the fact that we are still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and that the transmission rate in that locality has risen dramatically over recent weeks.

On Friday, I met business representatives from the north-west to discuss the impact that localised restrictions will have and the kind of support that they will need. Although the greatest help would be to allow them to continue trading, I reassured them that the Executive will provide financial assistance to those businesses instructed to close. Although it is mainly hospitality businesses that the Executive's decision will impact on, other businesses will feel the impact too.

I made it clear that it is not a choice between protecting our hospitals and protecting hospitality. I have been enormously proud of the responsible, resilient and determined fashion in which the hospitality sector in Northern Ireland has acted. Executive decisions have never been, and should never be, a binary choice between health and the economy. The economy is not a nebulous term. It represents every job, every pay cheque, every bill and every dinner on the table.

On Thursday, after the decision was made, I asked my officials to engage with Department of Finance officials. We have a number of possible options for providing support, but the priority is to devise a scheme that gets targeted financial help, in an efficient and streamlined way, to the businesses asked to close. My hope is that the Executive can agree the mechanics for how that support can be delivered within a matter of days.

I use this opportunity to remind people of the importance of following the Executive advice: wash your hands; socially distance; and wear your mask. We all carry the responsibility of playing our part in slowing the spread of

COVID, and those are the best ways in which to protect the health of our people and the health of our economy.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her answer and for joining me on Friday to meet some of the business leaders in my constituency. As I do, they recognise the role that the Minister has played for the economy in these challenging times. Our council was represented at that meeting. Do you see the council as being an option for getting the money out to businesses in a fast and timely manner?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for organising that meeting. People were confused and alarmed at the rising rate of transmission of the virus, but they were also significantly alarmed at the impact on the local economy, jobs and livelihoods.

The main focus will be on devising a scheme that is quick, clean and easy to administer. I was heartened to hear from the local council, which offered its help in any way that it could. When we eventually make a decision, the local council will have an important role to play in working with local businesses and in checking which are closed and which have been severely impacted on by the restrictions in the local area. If we can remove layers of bureaucracy by allowing the council to administer the scheme, I am relaxed about that, but the important thing is to get money out quickly to businesses in difficult circumstances.

Mr Dickson: Minister, given the inevitability of where we are in Derry and Strabane, what preparations did you make for that inevitability, or are you playing catch-up?

Mrs Dodds: Even health officials will remind the Member that they were extremely surprised by not only the rise in the number of cases but the exponential rise and how quickly the numbers rose in the area.

The Member asks a very useful question, though, because it is important that Members in this House realise that we as a Department have been warning of the impact of lockdown or restrictions on the local economy. We think that that will place our local businesses, which are just starting to build and recover a little bit from the earlier shutdown of the economy, in a really difficult place. Not only that, but any further lockdowns in the local economy, and the end of the furlough scheme, will see a significant rise in unemployment. We could potentially experience unemployment levels such as we have not seen since the early 1990s. That is not where I want Northern Ireland or its local communities to be, and I will try in every way possible to support the economy and those people who find themselves in difficult positions.

We are, of course, not playing catch-up in the Department for the Economy. We have already submitted our short-to medium-term recovery plan. Last week, I submitted documents to the Executive Office, which I hope will be discussed at the next Executive meeting, on the economic impact of restrictions and lockdown. These are very difficult, severe times for our economy, and working collectively together, not making political point-scoring, would be very helpful in seeing our people and our communities through hard times.

Ms Anderson: I support the call for immediate financial support for businesses in Derry and Strabane in particular as they face into more necessary restrictions. Some of those businesses are running on empty. Therefore, has the Minister compiled a bid that can go to the

British Exchequer — the Treasury — to support those businesses, particularly those that feel that they have been left behind, and the thousands who are categorised as self-employed who have not had a penny of support during this pandemic?

Mrs Dodds: First of all, I will correct the Member on a couple of issues that she has expressed. It is not up to me to compile a bid to the Exchequer on that. It would be for the Executive to make a financial ask and for the Finance Minister — her colleague — to translate that and talk to Her Majesty's Treasury about that.

In respect of those who are self-employed, about 78,000 self-employed people have been supported through the self-employed scheme that has been in place and continues to be in place right up until the end of October. That is possibly the highest proportion or percentage per head of population throughout the United Kingdom to be supported through the scheme. What the Member may be referring to is those people who were recently self-employed and, therefore, had not made a tax return. There is no doubt that those folk are in very difficult positions. I continue to talk to the Secretary of State for Business and have written directly to the Chancellor to indicate that this is a national problem that requires a national solution, and one that the Chancellor should address. I have common cause with MPs right across the United Kingdom in relation to that particular issue.

With your forbearance, Mr Speaker, I will round up. I absolutely agree with the Member on the need to get some financial support to those businesses that have suffered restrictions. I spoke on Friday to a number of hoteliers from the city, and they all indicated that they were really pleased with the way that trading had gone in August. They were looking forward to a better September/October, and they were well aware of the work that the tourism steering group had done in formulating and articulating bids to the Finance Minister. Indeed, the Finance Minister responded positively to those bids.

Therefore, they were completely taken unawares by the dreadful rise in the transmission of the virus and the fact that their industry was targeted for restrictions.

3.45 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to wind up her comments, please.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you.

Nevertheless, like all of the hospitality sector, they are resilient and will trade through it, but they need to know, as a matter of urgency, how long those restrictions will last.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for her comments so far. As furlough is running out, how does the Minister and her Department intend to support employees in the city and district who will have to self-isolate? There may be questions of affordability, but we cannot afford to have those who are supposed to be self-isolating attending work to feed their families.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to keep her remarks to two minutes, please.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I apologise.

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

Mr Speaker: I will not take a point of order during Question Time.

Mrs Dodds: Should I take the question? OK. There are two elements to this that I want to address. One is the issue of support for those who are self-isolating. The Minister of Finance has indicated that he will find out whether any kind of what we call Barnett consequential moneys would come to Northern Ireland specifically for that. I hope that we will be able to address, in the relatively near future, the financial issues for businesses that have been asked to close. I remind the House that the situation is likely to be repeated around Northern Ireland for some time, and therefore, we, as an Executive, have to be sure that there will be the finances to support that not just in the north-west but in other areas across Northern Ireland, should the need arise.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her remarks so far. One of the big issues facing Londonderry is hope for the future. One of the things that I would like the Minister to do is to make a comment about what she is doing to progress the Magee university, particularly the move towards the new medical school. That would send a strong message to the people in Londonderry about their future and their ability to come out of the COVID situation.

Mrs Dodds: Of course, the Executive took a decision to support the medical school at Magee. I noticed that, on social media this morning, there were calls out for their first students to apply for 2021. That is very hopeful. Also, I have been working with my Department around some of the city deal bids for the city of Londonderry. I am hopeful that they will start to progress their business cases, that we will see movement with regard to that funding direction and, as you said, hope for the city.

Mr T Buchanan: Minister, over recent days, there has been much media coverage of a potential circuit breaker across the UK and, indeed, across the Irish Republic. If that were to be the case, how would you see the Executive providing financial support to those who are unable to get to their place of work?

Mrs Dodds: Again, that is an important and timely question, given the speculation in the media. If the UK were to have a circuit breaker that would impact across the whole of the United Kingdom in the way that previous lockdowns have, it would be for our national Government to provide the funding and the help to businesses and individuals who are unable to work in that situation. If we have regional or subregional issues around further restrictions, either we get some additional help from the Exchequer or the Northern Ireland Executive will have to finance some of that.

Be aware that, if we should continue to do this, the Department of Health has indicated that this will impact on the economy for some time to come. I hear speculation that we could require more than one of these so-called circuit breakers. Before we talk any further on this, we should analyse the impact on the economy and analyse our ability to pay.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her update. I concur with her about the economy not being some nebulous term. It is really about people and the fact that the health of our businesses, many of which are SMEs, and their workers are very much interlinked.

The Minister made bids and was allocated funding to support economic recovery. Is she considering how that funding could be reprioritised to support some of the businesses that are struggling financially as a result of closures or reduced income?

Mrs Dodds: As I have indicated during this session of questions, the current situation is that we are looking at how we can immediately support businesses that have been impacted by the restrictions in the north-west. I have no doubt that we may have to look at that on a further subregional basis on a number of occasions. However, many of the bids that I made were to help the economy to recover and are aimed at the structural recovery of the economy so that we have a tourism and hospitality sector in which people can work and earn their living and in which we can be proud of Northern Ireland. One of the great things that focuses everyone's mind is the fact that the tourism and hospitality sector provides 65,000 jobs and contributed over £1 billion to the local economy last year. As the owner of the Bishop's Gate Hotel in the city said to me on Friday, "We need not only hope but to know that the Executive and the Assembly are with us in the long-term recovery of our sector and will stand by us". That is what most of those bids are designed to do, particularly the bids for tourism and hospitality.

Mr O'Toole: The Minister talked about bringing a paper to the Executive that reflects on the economic impact of further lockdowns, but, with respect, I say that we have yet to see a paper that posits a recovery plan for the first set of lockdowns. What exactly will the Minister bring to the Executive? Will it be a long-term economic strategy that looks six months or one year down the line to take us through the pandemic and out the other side? It would be really helpful to understand exactly what her Department will produce.

Mrs Dodds: I recommend to the Member as an urgent and required piece of reading the document that we published in June of this year: 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy'. In that document, we addressed short- and medium-term issues for the Northern Ireland economy: the need to support the traditional sectors that we rely on, that are part of our values and that many of us are so interlinked with but also the need to look at new opportunities for the Northern Ireland economy, particularly in the digital sector, health and life sciences, advanced manufacturing and, of course, the green economy. I already have a road map for those short- to medium-term interventions, and, of course, we are preparing an overall economic strategy, which will be not just for the Department for the Economy but for the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities. Those are all aspects of building the Northern Ireland economy for the next century.

Mr Muir: As the Minister will be aware, the package that she will, hopefully, bring forward will come from the pot of funding of £55 million. Mr Speaker, I ask for your forbearance so that I might explain. That pot of funding is for Translink — I was previously an employee of Translink — private coach operators, travel agents, hauliers, taxis and the excluded. There are probably more that I have forgotten about. If the Executive are not given additional financial support, how confident is the Minister that she will be able to support other council areas if they are given further restrictions?

Mrs Dodds: I will, perhaps, correct one element of the question. Translink has already been given tens of millions of pounds in additional funding during this financial year to support a recovery position and for the losses that it has incurred during the pandemic. Perhaps Translink has already had a lot of the allocations that it will get or require.

There are a huge number of demands in the system. Many people are hurting and have felt the harshness of the pandemic not just on health and family life but on their finances. It will, of course, be for the Finance Minister and the Executive to decide how that money is distributed. We will keep to the fore the areas that have suffered from local restrictions. We may need to ensure that the Exchequer knows of the difficulties for Northern Ireland.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for making her points and for all her efforts to date in supporting businesses through the COVID crisis.

How do the Executive decide between the health of our people and the economy of our country? Is it difficult to make such a decision? Will the Minister assure us that such a decision is fully assessed before it is made?

Mrs Dodds: The Member reflects on what all Ministers feel as they make decisions. As I have said before and as one Executive Minister has said today, this should never be about hospitality or hospitals: they are interlinked. Long-term unemployment as a result of an economic downturn caused by the pandemic will have grave consequences in communities across Northern Ireland. I have already told the House that we could see levels of unemployment not seen in Northern Ireland since the 1990s. That is a terrifying prospect for families, communities and individuals.

These are difficult questions. However, let us not forget that we are a resilient and hopeful people. We have come through dreadful and violent circumstances. We will weather the pandemic storm, but it will require us to work together to make sure that our focus is in the right place and that we can get help to those who really need it.

Mr McHugh: Minister, I live in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. I am only too aware of businesses that closed down last week in anticipation of restrictions coming in today. I am also well aware of employees on reduced income as a result of self-isolating, an anomaly that exists between those who work in private care homes and those who work for the Western Trust.

Given that your economic recovery strategy outlines the need to address regional imbalances, will you consider calling in Invest NI to prioritise areas of low employment, so that, hopefully, there would be greater input from Invest NI in job creation and financial assistance for job creation in the north-west?

Mrs Dodds: The Member raises an important element of the economic strategy that I outlined, which the Executive have adopted as part of their recovery strategy for Northern Ireland as a whole.

We need to address economic imbalances, not only in the north-west. Many parts of Northern Ireland feel the pain of high unemployment and reduced opportunities for younger people. One of the biggest factors that would enable us to do that would be bringing in jobs and investing in areas such as skills and education.

Just this morning, I announced 3,000 new online training places for those impacted by COVID or unemployment. I urge people to look at those training opportunities and take the opportunity now, while furlough still exists or while their hours are reduced, to upskill and improve their chances in the labour market. That is really important. Of course, I have also introduced the package on apprenticeships, and I will continue to look for opportunities, finances permitting, to improve the lot of young people in particular, who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Invest Northern Ireland, of course, works with councils and local development structures to try to address imbalances in skills and jobs.

4.00 pm

Finally, I look forward to progressing Project Stratum, which will help to address regional imbalances in the economy since so much of it will cover rural areas of Northern Ireland, thereby improving connectivity and increasing the ability of firms and individuals to be competitive.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for coming to the House and for her answers so far. She will be aware of the plight of cross-border workers, who have been impacted adversely in the north-west and in my region throughout this pandemic. When support is brought forward, Minister, for the north-west, and in response to any future COVID restrictions across the North, will she, along with the Communities Minister, who, ultimately, has responsibility for cross-border workers under EU law, ensure that they are looked after as part of any future arrangements?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question, which I will answer in two parts. First, the operation of the common travel area, which gives people the right to live and work in both jurisdictions right across the British Isles, is very important. Today, I briefed the Executive on how we could ensure that qualifications are recognised in all those areas so that working across borders becomes easier. We need to see the detail on that fairly quickly from the negotiations and from that perspective.

Secondly, I think that the Member's question refers to people who work in the Republic but, because they live in Northern Ireland, cannot claim the unemployment benefit that was awarded to people who were on furlough etc. This, I am afraid, is an EU regulation, and that is part of the problem of being controlled by the European Union.

Private Members' Business

Consequences of the British Government Breaking International Law

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly is appalled that the British Government have abandoned any pretence of adherence to international law; recognises that the potential for a trade agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom has significantly diminished as a result of the British Government reneging on key elements of the withdrawal agreement; acknowledges that that would be devastating for workers and families, with inevitable business failures, job losses and economic damage; and calls on the British Government to respect the rule of law and honour their obligations in full as set out in the withdrawal agreement that they negotiated and which the British Parliament agreed. — [Dr Archibald.]

Mr Givan: The Minister has taken us neatly on to a debate on Brexit [*Laughter.*] Thank you for that, Minister. The question that Members need to ask, first and foremost, when considering this debate, is this: has the United Kingdom broken the law? Members might believe that the United Kingdom's action is counterproductive because it could cause reputational damage on the world stage. It is interesting that nationalists are worrying about the British reputation across the globe, and that will not be lost on many people. Has the United Kingdom broken the law? I think that the answer is that it has not, because there have not been any court judgments in respect of this. The European Commission has instigated a notice of potential legal action, and that will run its course. However, much of the commentary from Members implies that the UK has broken the law, and that is not the case.

When we consider parliamentary sovereignty, ultimately, we are talking about the UK Parliament. The issue is being dealt with in the UK Parliament, in which colleagues of some Members of this House do not take their seats. However, those Members keep subjecting this Chamber to debate after debate on the issue. At least, to be fair to the SDLP, its members take their seats at Westminster and try to argue those points where power resides, unlike Sinn Féin. If that party was truly concerned about people's rights, it should take every forum open to it to articulate that on behalf of its people. However, it does not.

When it comes to parliamentary sovereignty, Members will know that no Executive branch or UK Minister can just sign up to an international treaty. Such treaties need to be brought through the national Parliament and transposed into domestic law. Hence, if parliamentary sovereignty is vital to enact or put into place such a law, Parliament can accept when it makes a mistake and may then decide to change that law. We should encourage that.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Will he reflect on the opinion of Martin Howe QC, who said that section 38 of the withdrawal agreement:

"preserves Parliamentary sovereignty",

and,

"makes it quite clear that Parliament has the right to pass the clauses which the government is proposing

and thereby override these errant clauses in the Protocol";

the errant clauses to which my friend refers?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Givan: The Member makes a helpful contribution. He makes the point for me: what Parliament can do, it can also undo. That will be legal. It may be subject to the reputational damage that Members opposite are concerned about, but, when it comes to the principle of what it can do, ultimately, Parliament is sovereign. That is why we believe in an independent United Kingdom. It is also why we wanted to release ourselves from the shackles of the European Union and the way in which it conducts itself.

In a previous era, Sinn Féin was with us on that. It was opposed to everything that Europe was trying to do. It opposed countless treaties; it campaigned against treaties. I wonder what those who fought in the 1916 rising would have thought of their comrades today. They fought for freedom. Now, their legacy has been passed on to people who are sycophants of the European Union and who subject themselves to foreign rule. Sinn Féin needs to ask itself whether it wants to keep bringing those motions back to the Assembly, because we will keep pointing out the contradictions.

As regards the fundamental principle of whether Parliament can do that, yes, it can. However, the point is that if clauses in the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill even come close to potentially breaking the law, Members can, rightly, call that into question, because regulations that are made under those clauses may breach the law and be subject to further legal debate. However, I do not think that those clauses come anywhere close to breaking international law, yet we have listened now for weeks to concerns being expressed by Members on that issue.

Mr O'Toole: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. He said that the provisions in the Bill do not come close to breaking international law. Why, then, does he think that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said at the Dispatch Box that those provisions would break international law?

Mr Givan: The Member can ask the Secretary of State that question. I am not worried about the Secretary of State: I am worried about what is actually in the Bill. Ultimately, let a case be brought, and if it ends up in court, we will get a judicial ruling on it. However, I doubt very much that it will ever come to that.

Even the UK Human Rights Act 1998 contains provisions for non-compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights, which one would consider to be an important treaty. The 1998 Act makes provision for non-compliance where the United Kingdom Government feel that they want to do that.

Turning to the protocol —.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Givan: Yes. I have been struggling to see how long I have left, Mr Speaker, as the time has not been displayed.

Mr Speaker: You have very little time.

Mr Givan: How long?

Mr Speaker: You have been too generous in allowing interventions.

Mr Givan: That has been my problem; the time has not been displayed, Mr Speaker. However, I am sure that it will be kept in order for the benefit of other Members.

Mr Speaker: You do not have long left. Thank you.

Mr Givan: Article 16 of the protocol allows for potentially serious breaches. Therefore, the protocol itself allows for a breach to take place. Article 1 refers to the importance of the Good Friday Agreement.

Contained in the Good Friday Agreement is the principle of consent. We are an integral part of the United Kingdom, so membership of the United Kingdom should ensure that we have free trade with its component parts. What is happening with the protocol is the undermining of the Belfast Agreement and our position in the United Kingdom. I am not sure whether my time is up, as it has not been on display.

Mr Speaker: I have been advised that your time is up. You adequately put your position, thankfully.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful that the motion has been brought before the Assembly, and I support it in broad terms. It is worth saying at the beginning something that I have said recently in several of these debates. Earlier this year, the Assembly passed a motion calling for an extension to the transition period that was ignored by the UK Government. As all of us on these islands and across the Continent look at the choppy headwaters of a pandemic, with a rising number of cases and severe economic difficulty likely to flow from it, I reiterate that we must surely all agree in this Assembly that the most rationale thing would be to follow the Assembly resolution from a few months back and extend the transition period. That having been said, it unfortunately looks as though the ideologues in Number 10 are not going to do that.

The motion sets out extreme disappointment and disapproval that the UK Government have chosen to state — not just in the legislation but in the House of Commons, where they have owned up to this — that they plan to take the power to break international law. That is clearly unacceptable, as I have said in the Assembly multiple times. Why is it unacceptable? It is unacceptable because international law relies on states doing what they say that they are going to do in international treaties. The point that has been made more than once, including today by Mr Givan, is that Parliament is sovereign and therefore reserves the right to resile from any international legal obligations that it makes.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He is a doughty champion of the European Union, no doubt because it is an institution of rules. That being the case, how does he explain the European Union tearing up the convergence criteria that it established for countries to be admitted to the eurozone when subsequently allowing Greece and Italy to join? Its rules mean one thing at one time and another thing at another.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful for that, Mr Speaker. Convergence rules and the eurozone are not what we are debating today, albeit I will say that the European Union

has made clear its position on the accession, as it were, of this jurisdiction back in, should we so wish, at a later date.

I will go back to my remarks on the motion. It matters profoundly that the UK Government and, indeed, all parties to the Good Friday Agreement not just live up to their obligations to one another but treat one another with a degree of trust and respect. I am afraid that that has been sadly lacking over the past few years.

As I have said multiple times in the House, it is not just liberal Remainers like me or bleeding-heart Europeans who are annoyed about the UK Government breaking international law or saying that they are going to do so. We have had Brexiteers such as Michael Howard and Geoffrey Cox, people whom I agree on very little with, talk about how terrible it is that any UK Government should admit that they are going to break treaties. Some in this Chamber might say that British Governments have a history of doing that, but I, despite being a nationalist who is proud to serve as a nationalist in the Chamber, used to work for the UK Government and therefore have a slightly different attitude to the UK state. I do not stand here and gleefully bash it, as Mr Givan sought to characterise, but be in absolutely no doubt that this UK Government are becoming a pariah around the world because of the way in which they treat their international treaty obligations. That is not something that you have to take from me. You can take it from a certain Margaret Thatcher, who said in 1975 to the Conservative Group for Europe at the launch of the Conservative campaign to keep Britain in Europe:

"Britain does not break Treaties. It would be bad for Britain, bad for our relations with the rest of the world and bad for any future treaty on trade".

It is not just about this part of the world, although Northern Ireland is critical to it, but about how the state sees itself around the world. If it wants to be taken seriously, it has to live up to its treaty obligations. It is fine to say that Parliament is sovereign.

If Parliament is sovereign, what is the point in ever signing a treaty? It does not make any sense to simply be that reductive.

4.15 pm

The Good Friday Agreement is ultimately what is being protected in the Ireland protocol. Let us be clear: no one thinks that the Ireland protocol is an ideal or optimal outcome for Northern Ireland, for this whole island or, indeed, for trade relations across these islands. It is simply and only a reaction to the red lines of successive British Governments — red lines that were, in part, produced with the encouragement and collaboration of the party opposite. Nobody should be in any doubt that this is anyone's ideal scenario, but this is a set of protections that we need. They were carefully crafted and laboriously negotiated by the UK and the EU. They are in a treaty that is now lodged at the United Nations. It is genuinely unthinkable that any country seeking to take itself seriously would walk away from them now.

I have heard others in the Chamber complain about the provisions of the protocol and Northern Ireland's place, as it were, in the UK internal market. Let me be absolutely clear: I want to see unfettered trade east-west and North/

South. Nobody should be in any doubt about that, but there are a couple of points in relation to that. First, the —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: I will draw my remarks to a close.

First, the thing that is causing disruption to trade on this island and across these islands is Brexit. I support the motion, because it —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — reasserts that this is about maintaining international law and delivering on the obligations made to people here.

Dr Aiken: First of all, I commend the motion tabled by Sinn Féin, particularly Dr Caoimhe Archibald, because the tone of the debate has probably been better than the usual Brit-bashing fest that we have been used to over the last month and a bit. I also commend my very learned friend from South Belfast for realising the Ulster Unionist Party's desire to have no borders North/South or east-west —

Mr O'Toole: I think there is only one learned Member in the Chamber.

Dr Aiken: — but one of the most important things that we need to consider here is the importance of where we are at for Northern Ireland *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Members, order, please.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. That was quite disrespectful to talk over me. It does not really suit you, Matthew, because you are not normally of that sort. I imagine that I will continue in the spirit of that as well.

The issue is the United Kingdom having the possibility of breaching international law. The most important point is that the United Kingdom has looked to support the Vienna convention for a considerable time; indeed, the Ulster Unionist Party has noted with concern the approach from the British Government in their attempts to breach this law. We have raised those issues in the House of Lords; indeed, we have raised those issues directly with the Secretary of State. One of the reasons we have raised those issues is that the Internal Market Bill does not answer the fundamental questions that we have to deal with, particularly about trade coming from Great Britain into Northern Ireland, or what we would call the level playing field for Northern Ireland and a level playing field across our nation, the United Kingdom.

People might cite examples of the European Union, and we have already had one example being quoted about the Grexit situation and what happens to Greece. Unfortunately, for many of us who have served, when you have to deal with the aftermath of the EU's intervention in the former republic of Yugoslavia and the disaster that that was, what is happening in the Mediterranean right now or, indeed, the meddling that seems to have taken place in Ukraine, you realise that the European Union is hardly a paragon of virtue when it comes to international —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: Certainly.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member agree with me that there is an irony in being lectured on the need and munificence of

European Union rule when this is an organisation whose books, for 20 years, auditors have been unable to clear?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member for his comments. The next thing he will be telling me is that they will be following the Northern Ireland Government's particular rules — that they have not had their accounts audited, or they have always been given a qualification so far.

The other issue that we need to consider is that we have had examples cited of the United States. It was of considerable concern to us in the Ulster Unionist Party that, less than two weeks ago and despite the implications of COVID, Members from other parties drove all the way down to Dublin for what was essentially a photo opportunity with Simon Coveney. When Simon Coveney, the next day — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. Sorry, Mr Aiken. Members, I appeal to you to pay respect to the Member who is on his feet.

Dr Aiken: When Simon Coveney went to the United States, he cited the example of quite a few members of the United States Administration and the legislature and their support for the so-called rule of law. Indeed, one of the members that he quoted was a Republican Party representative who supported such really sort of proper things as Trump's wall, repealing the Affordable Care Act, removal from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), removal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and indeed, for many of us on this side of the House, there is considerable concern that that representative seemed to spend a lot of his time glorifying IRA terrorism in the past. None of these things is likely to be able to raise the point to us to show that this is the kind of thing that we should look at, and that is not an example. If anybody thinks that it is just a question of Republican Administrations, Republican and Democrat Administrations in the United States have both been very neglectful of international law and international treaties.

The real issue — I have said it time and again — is that we have an opportunity, as Members of the Assembly, to send a clear message to Frost and Barnier, who are going into a non-tunnel tunnel, depending on which way you look at it, that we want to see the lightest touch of regulation for all the people in Northern Ireland. We do not want to see the goods in our supermarkets going up in price. We do not wish to see a position in our electricity market where we will have to pay an additional 5% for energy. We should, as an Assembly, gather together to instruct the Executive to talk directly to Frost and Barnier and say, "For Northern Ireland, you keep on saying that you want to put the Belfast Agreement to the fore of where we are. Well, let's do it".

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: You have already intervened.

Let us do it. We have an opportunity here.

I think that this is the fourth debate that we have had on the issue. The Ulster Unionist Party has put in two motions. One of them is that we want a debate about the issues, about us talking to both the United Kingdom and the European Union about putting the interests of Northern Ireland first. We still have that opportunity. Rather than continuously talking about what the United Kingdom

Government have done and are not going to do, we clearly need to talk about what the European Union should do. As an Assembly, we, on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, should do that.

Mr Dickson: I rise to support the motion and to speak on the subject for what, I think, is certainly the third or — maybe Mr Aiken is right — fourth time in the past number of weeks. Brexit is a huge multifaceted issue, although I am not sure why we keep coming back to the same, specific point when the Assembly has already debated and voted on this.

I know that my colleague Dr Stephen Farry MP has been working hard to address these issues in Parliament by tabling amendments to the Internal Market Bill, as indeed have other Northern Ireland MPs.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Mr Dickson, could you take your seat, please? I ask Members in a sedentary position not to make their voices heard. It is disrespectful to the Member who is speaking. Thank you. Go ahead, Mr Dickson.

Mr Dickson: Perhaps, Mr Speaker, the party that tabled the motion could tell us what it is doing on the issue other than submitting motions to the Assembly.

I do not really want to stand here and, once again, rail at the United Kingdom Government just for the sake of it. I am genuinely disappointed about the path that the Government are taking and the damage that it is doing to our standing and reputation around the world, a comment that has been made by others in the Chamber. The provisions of the Internal Market Bill that enable the United Kingdom Government to override an international agreement are an embarrassment. They need a rethink urgently and, as the Bill moves to the Lords, perhaps we will see the shape of some changes to come.

At this point, we all need to accept that Brexit is a mess. It is bad for business; it is bad for people's lives; and it will likely be bad for the international relations of the United Kingdom and its diplomatic influence around the world. We know that the protocol is not an ideal solution, but it is a response to the issues that a hard Brexit throws up. It is a compromise of a compromise; it is damage limitation. The original backstop would have offered much more and a more workable way forward for the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, but that was rejected by some because it did not go far enough to depart us from the EU. Now the Government say that the provisions to override the protocol are just a safety net, supposedly to protect the Good Friday Agreement. If such changes were required, why were they not negotiated into the original agreement? However, the United Kingdom Government agreed on a deal last year, and the Prime Minister ran a general election on it. If these issues were so central, why is it taking this long for the Government to take action on it? There is, of course, the state aid red herring, which ignores the reality that the United Kingdom agreed with Japan and that, in fact, that binds it to stricter state aid rules than those that the EU proposes. Now we have a situation where the UK's largest trading partner has launched legal action to enforce the agreement, all while the country seeks a comprehensive trade deal with it.

This is yet another self-inflicted wound. How can the United Kingdom go to other countries and seek new trade agreements when it openly breaks deals signed not even a year ago? A no-deal outcome was never mentioned

during the referendum, but now we are being told that it is a good outcome. For whom? Certainly not for the workers and businesses that I come into contact with in Northern Ireland. On top of the economic pain that we already face, it will just add further devastation. Ultimately, the UK Government can sort this by meeting their international obligations and striking a comprehensive trade deal with the European Union.

By any stretch of the imagination, 2020 has been and will be a tough year for everyone. People are worried about their income and their health, and businesses are on the edge. The deadline is galloping towards us. We need to build a better future with fewer barriers to trade, protecting people's lives and standards. Sadly, I am not convinced that debating the same motion again and again will achieve any of that.

Mr Stalford: Before I get into my comments, Mr Speaker, I apologise for my chuntering from a sedentary position on the Back Bench. I was chatting to my colleague from North Antrim, who was just so excited to see me back *[Laughter.]* I apologise to you, sir, for any offence that I caused you.

Mr Speaker: Mr Storey may be a bad influence on you. I will keep an eye on that *[Laughter.]*

Mr Stalford: The dictionary definition of cynicism is:

"An inclination to believe that people are motivated purely by self-interest".

Week after week, it appears as though we are debating a motion on one aspect or another of the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union. On this occasion, it was tabled by Sinn Féin. When the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland went into the Common Market together, Sinn Féin opposed that. When the Single European Act was passed, Sinn Féin opposed that. When the Maastricht treaty, which created the European Union, was passed, Sinn Féin was opposed to that. When the Nice treaty came along, Sinn Féin was opposed to that. Sinn Féin was opposed to the European constitution. Sinn Féin was opposed to the Lisbon treaty. Sinn Féin has been Eurosceptic for longer than the Conservative and Unionist Party, but, suddenly, in this context, it is the great defender of an organisation that, not a few years ago, it was denouncing as a corporatist scam that suppressed wages and exploited workers. It is for them to justify that sudden volte-face.

I have no doubt that the next Member to speak will say in that perfunctory way, like some Brezhnev-era apparatchik trotting out the party line, that, "We are in favour of a reformed European Union". Our experience has taught us that reform of the European Union is impossible. It is an organisation that, from the 1957 Treaty of Rome, exists, according to its own definitions, for one purpose and one purpose alone: ever closer union and the dismantling of the nation state. The irony of republicans who drape themselves in the Irish flag and defend the sovereignty of the Irish people, gained at such cost from evil British imperialists, now getting to their feet to defend the quasi-national Government of the European Union is clearly lost on them.

It is ironic that they decry rule from London but plead and beg to be ruled from Brussels. What sort of nationalists are they? People can see through that; they know what it is. It is positioning, although not out of any fealty to

the European Union. To be fair, I have long given up on converting my colleague from South Belfast on that issue. That pass has long been sold, given his adherence and devotion to an organisation headed up by a failed German Defence Minister, who had to be got out of the country because she was the least popular Minister in Merkel's Cabinet, and they found her a cushy job in Brussels on €122,000 a year. We have given up on trying to convert Mr O'Toole to see the true nature of the European Union, but there is hope. There may be hope: there may still be a beating nationalist heart in Sinn Féin. I do not know whether Sinn Féin is nationalist any more. Is it multi-nationalist? Is it corporatist? I am sure that Gerry Carroll has a few words that he would use to describe it.

4.30 pm

What the Government have done is, rightly, to take the necessary measures to ensure that we are not tied in to this dangerous protocol that is —

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Yes, I will.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed for coming back. We have enjoyed it. Thank you, Christopher. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Stalford: Thank you for *[Inaudible.]* It is always appreciated. I was worried that someone would not get in.

What the Government have done is to move to ameliorate the dangerous and damaging effects that the protocol will have in cutting Northern Ireland off from its largest market. You cannot stand to your feet and say, "People need certainty, and businesses need help and reassurance", while at the same time defending a proposal that cuts us off from our largest market. If you defend that proposal, you are hurting Northern Ireland business and making it harder for people in Northern Ireland to get ahead and make a living. You cannot stand to your feet and say that you are standing up for the community when you are taking money out of your constituents' pockets by supporting the protocol. The European Union is bad for business. It is bad for people's lives. It is bad for people's health. I welcome the fact that we will no longer be living under its regulatory regime.

It is important to put on record the opinion of Martin Howe QC, who said:

"there is a general principle of international law that treaty powers should be exercised in good faith, and a blockage by the EU ... of reasonable 'goods at risk' ... passing from GB to NI"

could be classed as "bad faith". Indeed, that is precisely how it should be classed. The idea that bad faith in this process has come only from one source — London — is for the birds. Throughout this entire negotiation, the EU has used Northern Ireland as a bargaining chip. It threatens the prosperity of our people. At one point in the negotiations, it was threatening our —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Stalford: — very food supplies, but Members here stand to their feet and sing the praises —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Stalford: — of that organisation. I trust our people to govern themselves rather than to be governed —

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Stalford: — by that cabal.

Ms Anderson: The motion reflects the views of the majority of Members in the Chamber who are absolutely appalled that the British Government have abandoned even the pretence of adhering to international law. While Tony Blair pretended that his Iraq War was legal, Boris Johnson does not even pretend: he is boasting about breaking international law. As for his claim that he is protecting the Good Friday Agreement — that is a lie. We already know what British Ministers such as Michael Gove think of the Good Friday Agreement: he described it as wicked.

Universal condemnation of the British Government by people such as Angela Merkel, Joe Biden, Nancy Pelosi, Geoffrey Cox and presidents of groups of the European Parliament falls on deaf ears. The British Government have been served formal notice by the EU that it is taking legal action against Britain for breaking the law — for acting like a rogue state. In this place, we have Ministers Dodds and Poots using their ministerial power to act more like Brexiteers than Executive Ministers. All Executive Ministers know that EU law, policy and funding touch on almost every aspect of life here. Indeed, there are 156 areas of all-Ireland cooperation, and they are some of the reasons why we need EU alignment across this island. Section 45 of the lawbreaking Bill gives the British Secretary of State, who confirmed that he is breaking the law, the powers to ignore the EU requirements for goods coming into the North and to renege on the Ireland protocol and key elements of the withdrawal agreement —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No, I will not.

— so that chlorinated chicken and hormone-injected beef can go into the mouths of babes.

Section 46 overrides the power of the Assembly and the Executive and gives the British Government the power to give financial assistance — probably to their friends — with no areas excluded: health, water, electricity, education and transport are all up for grabs, allowing British Ministers to run riot on matters that reside in the remit of the Assembly. The Assembly has refused to introduce water charges and objected to the privatisation of our health service, but will British Ministers try to impose these things over our heads? We know only too well that it is not only British Tory Ministers who use their power to do favours for their friends. Here, some £500 million of public money went up in RHI smoke, literally, so that some of that was done for their friends.

Members on the opposite Benches want us to suck it up and live in some kind of hokey-cokey Ireland: one part in the EU; another part out. We are not sucking it up.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In light of the RHI report, will you refer the Member's comments? Will the Member's comments be investigated in light of what she claimed in the House today? Clearly, what she said was not in keeping with the inquiry's findings. Therefore, I ask her to withdraw her comments.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to stick to the motion, please.

Ms Anderson: I will stick to the motion.

Even some of their supporters now realise that the 310-mile border that partitions Ireland is not an issue just for Irish republicans and nationalists; it is now a problem for unionist and nationalist farmers and businesses, just as it is now a problem for the EU.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No, thank you.

On this day 52 years ago, 5 October, people took to the streets to demand civil rights and got their heads smashed in for doing so. Fifty-two years on, hard-won rights are being trampled on by a British Government who are breaking international law, and they will likely trade protections against torture for grubby trade deals with foreign tyrants. Disabled rights — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Ms Anderson, take your seat for a second, please.

Mr Storey, for the final time this afternoon, please, respect people who are speaking.

Ms Anderson: Thank you.

Disabled rights, political rights and rights for carers that are protected by the EU have already gone. Members on the other side of the Chamber can ignore the conversation taking place about the form and shape of the new Ireland, but they cannot stop it, and they do not have the strategic vision to shape it.

To SMEs that want to trade with the EU and the rest of the world, to farmers who want their single farm payment, to students who want to enjoy the ERASMUS experience, to workers who want guaranteed maternity leave and holiday pay and to employers who do not want to juggle two sets of employment rules, I say this: there is a democratic way back into the EU. The European Council sent a message to us when it said that, if this country is reunited —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Anderson: — the whole of Ireland will remain in the EU.

Mr Middleton: Another day, another motion on the withdrawal agreement and the protocol, and this at a time when constituencies are struggling, businesses are crippled and constituents are worried about their health and the implications of COVID-19. Once again, Sinn Féin has come forward with a Brit-bashing motion, a political stunt that will have no impact in the Assembly.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: In two seconds.

However, where it will have an impact, of course, Sinn Féin does not take its seats.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member for giving way. Perhaps I was under a misapprehension or a false impression that the debate was going to be held in a respectful manner and, until the last contributor, I thought that it was. I ask us all to stop this incessant Brit-bashing and concentrate on the issues at hand.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for his intervention. Unfortunately, however, it does not surprise me that that

is the tone adopted. The people of the Foyle constituency know exactly what Sinn Féin is like and it has been exposed, time and time again. Thankfully, the more people realise what Sinn Féin is about, the better this country will be.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: I will give way for the last time.

Mr Storey: Of course, the Member for Foyle keeps the law, unlike the previous contributor, who, in her tweet today advocated that we should keep to the COVID-19 rules. It is a pity that she did not apply the same rules when she attended the funeral of Bobby Storey.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I completely agree. Again, on all those issues, the people are not stupid. People see Sinn Féin's hypocrisy for exactly what it is.

Nationalist and republican representatives in the Chamber cannot pick and choose which parts of an international agreement they want to honour. The DUP tabled 12 amendments to the Internal Market Bill, one of which would have given this place consent over the protocol, but the SDLP voted against it, and Sinn Féin did not turn up to vote against it. It seems that some Members and their parties in the Chamber think that only the provisions of the Belfast Agreement and international agreements that benefit nationalists are what matter.

Whatever the circumstances, the approach by Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Alliance Party is not acceptable. Sadly, local politicians have been used by the European Union over the past four years. For the EU, this was never about protecting peace in Northern Ireland. It has always been the case that the EU cannot accept the fact that the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, and it cannot get over it. The EU continues to use Northern Ireland as a weapon to punish the United Kingdom as a whole. It is my hope that the Members across the Chamber will soon recognise that fact.

The reality is that the EU is failing to honour its own international commitments as set out in the withdrawal agreement. Article 1 of the Northern Ireland protocol states that it is:

“without prejudice to the provisions of the 1998 Agreement in respect of the constitutional status of Northern Ireland”

and goes on to say that it:

“respects the essential State functions and territorial integrity of the United Kingdom.”

The problem is that the EU has not respected those aims. It has never fully understood the Belfast Agreement, nor has it ever respected the principle of consent. It has never recognised the sovereignty of internal UK trade, and it will not accept the fact that east-west trade is just as important as North/South trade to many others in the Chamber.

Finally, I want to say that it is disappointing, once again, that the motion has taken the turn that it has. I appeal to the Members of other parties who are being used by Sinn Féin — because Sinn Féin will quote this and say that the Assembly has passed the motion — not to allow themselves to be used. The people caught on to Sinn Féin

a long time ago. I urge Members to put Northern Ireland first and foremost and ensure that we get the best for our citizens.

Ms Sheerin: I support the motion. According to the British Government, the Internal Market Bill will prevent further divergence between the North and Britain. Many would argue that that is something that Brexit itself has made inevitable. Setting aside the fact that we are operating in a contested territory with a history of conflict and competing narratives and that our systems are intrinsically different from those in Britain, one obvious issue on which the North is already in stark contrast to the UK is on the provision of rights. We are at a rights deficit compared with Britain. We do not have a single equality Act in the North and have relied on the EU for most of our rights protections until this point. Given how rights were denied and distributed in the past, that is a sensitive subject, and protections are powerful.

Many of the rights that we have now come to take for granted, such as the right to parental leave or the guarantee of equal pay regardless of race, gender or religion, have been in place because of EU directives. The Irish protocol gave us a promise that leaving the EU would not automatically mean losing those things. An example of that is the fact that annex 1 of the protocol includes EU directives on equal treatment in the workplace.

4.45 pm

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sheerin: No, thank you very much. Not after the way in which you spoke to my colleague.

The Internal Market Bill, on the other hand, potentially gives the British Government the power to override those things. We have seen in recent times that, under immigration law, the British Government regard us all as British, even though the Good Friday Agreement stated that we could be British, Irish or both, as per a person's own identity. I have to renounce a British identity that I have never had. However much that might grate on me, it does not change my ability to work. It looks, however, post-Brexit, as though Civil Service employees, for example, will have to have British nationality. For those not born in the North and not automatically treated as British by virtue of a birth certificate, that presents a significant challenge.

When the chief executive of the Human Rights Commission presented to the Executive Office Committee a couple of weeks ago, I asked him whether it was likely that we are going to have a situation in which Irish passport holders end up with more free movement rights than British passport holders. He told me that, all through the negotiations, the commission was told that there would be an: "inevitable asymmetry of rights".

Gardaí in the Twenty-six Counties can ask for passports from non-EU citizens. Post-Brexit, a British passport holder from the North is a non-EU citizen. Does that mean that you have to carry your passport if you are British but that I do not because I am Irish? Of course, on continued access to and exercise of EU rights, opportunities and benefits for Irish citizens in the North, we still have no clarity as to whose responsibility that will be. It has already been acknowledged that, for cross-border justice cooperation, no deal will leave us with a gap in law enforcement capability generally.

I am lucky enough to have been born in the 1990s, but, with one parent from another jurisdiction on this island, crossing the border was a common feature of my childhood. My memories of soldiers peering in through the window as we drove over Lifford bridge are few, but they were fraught with fear and anxiety, which I inherited. We do not want to go back to having army checkpoints. For anyone who lives on or around the border, that is not something that you will endure once or twice a month whilst on a visit to your granny, safe in the knowledge that you will soon be enjoying contraband Coca-Cola hidden from your mother. Instead, it will be a daily inconvenience. Imagine having to present your passport —.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sheerin: No, thank you.

Imagine having to present your passport going through a checkpoint on your way to work in the morning, on your way to get groceries on a Saturday or with your children in the back seat as you collect them from school. We are less than three months out, yet we do not know whether that will be a reality.

For EU migrants who have made their home here, it looks as though they will require an electronic travel authorisation (ETA) to go into the Twenty-six Counties, making constant applications in order to commute. If you were born in Portugal but are now playing football in Dungannon, you will need an ETA if your team draws one from Monaghan, Cavan or Donegal in the Ulster Championship. Although that is an example that trivialises the issue, for our migrant population, many of whom will have language barriers and the challenges of racism and stereotyping to deal with, it is yet another barrier and yet another attack on their rights. It isolates and disenfranchises a group of people who have come here to make a better life for themselves and who enrich and bring diversity to our society.

The charter went further than the convention to protect immigration rights. Now the Tories are trying to give themselves Henry VIII powers to override EU immigration legislation post-Brexit. The protocol and the withdrawal agreement protected our rights as listed in the ECHR and the Good Friday Agreement via two mechanisms: the non-diminution of rights, which is, in layman's terms, a guarantee from the British Government not to roll back on rights; and a dedicated mechanism in the form of funding and powers to human rights organisations that work here in the North to hold them to that promise. The Internal Market Bill risks both those measures. Considering the British Government's form, I have grave concerns.

Mr Catney: I support the motion. Although I was shocked when it came to light that the Tory Government intended to deliberately break international law, I did not worry, because, time and again, they have changed concrete policy on a whim, based on whether the Lord Emperor Cummings has had his morning coffee. I waited patiently for the inevitable backtracking and U-turn, but here we are today, with the EU having begun a formal legal process against the UK, and still we have no movement from the Prime Minister. The arrogance of his post-Empire delusion has gone completely overboard. We laugh and mock when the president of the United States gets up to such nonsense. Anybody watching the Government Benches

in Westminster will see that Trumpism is alive and well in Britain.

The Internal Market Bill is just one more example of a Tory Government that will do anything to get back to their self-perceived glory days, at anyone's expense. We are at a critical point. The end of the year is only around the corner. Without action now, our businesses, our employees and all our citizens will suffer. I note with interest that, in response to my question for written answer, the Minister for the Economy said that she had frequent discussions with the United Kingdom Business Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary of State in the run-up to the publication of the Internal Market Bill. I wonder whether she did her bit as a Minister of the Executive to voice the concerns of businesses and citizens here, who face a cliff edge in January with seemingly no prospect of a positive outcome.

I can only base my decisions in the Chamber on my own life experiences. I opened my first businesses when I was young. Some suppliers gave me a chance. I worked hard to repeatedly build up trust with them so that I could be supported throughout my career. That is the only way to build a successful agreement: through building trust. Without trust, there is no possible way forward or chance of success, only hurt and despair for all involved. Due to the actions of the disillusioned British Government, there is no trust. They have shown time and time again that they will willingly break their agreements. More significantly for us, they have shown that they could not care less about Northern Ireland. They tell us that they are looking out for us while threatening us with food shortages and tearing up agreements designed to protect us from the worst impacts of their own disastrous vanity projects. We in this Chamber must say clearly that the British Government must honour the withdrawal agreement to protect jobs, our businesses and our future.

Mr Muir: Once again, I rise to speak on behalf of the Alliance Party on the subject of Brexit. I must say that it feels a bit like Groundhog Day, given the number of motions that we have debated thus far. There has probably been more heat than light that has come out of those.

The Alliance Party is keen to ensure that a successful negotiation is concluded and an outcome is reached. However, it is unhelpful for the Assembly to use this issue to vent long-held resentment towards the EU or the UK Government. The right thing for the Assembly to do is to call on both sides to negotiate in good faith to secure the best possible outcome for the lives and livelihoods of the people of Northern Ireland. The UK Government's willingness to break international law is not good-faith negotiation. It reduces the chances of a comprehensive free trade agreement. We are not naive about the negotiation process, but the UK Government's expression of their willingness to break international law was a mistake and has made a deal more difficult.

My party has been consistent from the start. We supported Remain. We would not be having this debate if we were remaining within the European Union. We were against the withdrawal agreement, and we supported an extension to the transition period, which would have been especially important in the light of the economic circumstances that we face in the context of COVID-19. However, regrettably, we are where we are. The only option that remains is for both sides to negotiate in good faith and strike a deal that is best for Northern Ireland.

Mr McNulty: I support the motion. Even though it feels a bit like a repeat of previous motions, there is merit in revising the arguments.

The Ireland protocol contains vital protections for the North and the whole island of Ireland. The protocol is no one's first choice for our island, but it is a necessary response and compromise that has been forced by the hard Brexit ideology of the right-wing ideologues in Downing Street. The Internal Market Bill is a blatantly irresponsible instrument that seeks to override the Ireland protocol. It recklessly threatens the Good Friday Agreement, in substance and spirit.

Right now, businesses want the protocol implemented in a way that works. Right now, businesses want maximum access to the UK and EU markets. Right now, businesses want and need clear and unambiguous information on where they stand and what the future holds so that they can plan and prepare. Right now, businesses and communities know that the way to achieve this is for the UK to abide by its treaty obligations and work constructively to implement the Ireland protocol.

They know that if you try to assert exclusive sovereignty over this part of Ireland, you are doomed to failure. Are we, here, just going to be collateral damage of Tory ideologues' Brexit bonkers?

Over 20 years ago, the Good Friday Agreement recognised the importance of shared sovereignty and recognised the importance of the EU, the UK, the Northern Executive and the Dublin Government's involvements. The British Government's threatened divergence from previously agreed international agreements breaks the law. It is incredible that there are Members opposite who are cool with that.

A Member opposite spoke of cynicism. Well, he cannot be cynical about the SDLP's commitment to the EU and to the values of respect, human dignity, human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law.

I am a proud Irishman and a proud citizen of Europe. I abhor the fact that my rights as an EU citizen are being stripped away and that there are those in this Chamber who are going along with it to appease Tory overlords.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNulty: No, I want to get home.

That cannot be allowed to happen. My rights and the rights of every EU citizen, every Irish citizen, must be protected. The Ireland protocol must be honoured. I support the motion.

Mr Allister: So here we are, the third successive week in which we have been debating a motion so that Sinn Féin and other Europhiles can beat their chests and vent their spleen about Brexit and, effectively, howl at the moon about the fact that we are leaving the EU. Three weeks of the same thing, interspersed only with the interesting fact that, last week, a Sinn Féin Minister proposed a Brexit-enabling Bill to this House. It was a welcome break in that particular litany of approach.

This is a motion built upon — let us use a kind word — a misconception. The misconception that international law, in some way, trumps domestic law and that, in some way, it trumps parliamentary sovereignty. It does neither. It is a fundamental rule of our constitution that no treaty can

change our law without an Act of Parliament giving effect to it. The Act of Parliament that gave effect to this treaty was the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020. Section 38 could not have been clearer:

“nothing in this Act derogates from the sovereignty of ... Parliament”.

Jo Maugham QC has already been referred to by Mr Stalford. He is no friend of the Government. He is the founder of the Good Law Project that has brought many challenges over Brexit, but he said that:

“If parliamentary sovereignty ... means anything ... it must mean Parliament can enact ... legislation that breaches international law.”

That is “Mr Europe” himself speaking. That is up —.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way because neither Miss Sheerin nor Mr McNulty chose to. They both mentioned rights and equality. The Member will recall from the time that I was blissfully employed by him, in his European office, *[Laughter]* that there was a time when the only people that it was legal to discriminate against, in the entirety of Europe, were people from Northern Ireland from a Protestant community background who applied for jobs in the police. Who gave the permission and made the accommodation to allow that to happen? Maybe the Member could illuminate the House on that?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: Yes of course. The Member has emerged very well from his difficult background, I must say. *[Laughter.]* He has done very well, and I take some pride in that. *[Laughter.]*

The Member is right. All of that was EU-induced, and, of course, the British Government had to seek an exemption from the European Convention on Human Rights to bring in that discrimination. The people complaining today were not complaining then about any of those matters.

5.00 pm

Let us be clear: Parliament can do and undo. That is perfectly lawful and within parliamentary sovereignty. To hear Sinn Féin, particularly the Member for Foyle who, to this day, is proud of her breaking of the law as a bomber, pontificating about upholding the rule of law has a special resonance all of its own. It is a party that, in more recent times, has been more than happy to break the law on COVID restrictions, but, today, it is pontificating about someone daring to break the law. That is such dissemblance. However, the dissembling does not end there. The party pretends concern over job losses and business failures. Those are the things that they want to preserve by supporting the protocol, because it is the protocol that threatens jobs, fetters our trade with our biggest market and will put businesses out of business, and it is the protocol that will take money out of the pockets of our consumers to pay the extra tariffs and customs. However, they come, with crocodile tears, with a motion about threats to business and job losses, when the very thing that they are supporting is the thing that will do that. Does Sinn Féin care? No, because the ideological achievement of driving a border down the Irish Sea trumps everything for Sinn Féin.

My only regret is that some who should know better — some who recognise the pattern of needless motions — will egg them on today by voting for that motion. It is time that they drew a line and realised where they were being led. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: I call John O'Dowd to close and make a winding-up speech. He has 10 minutes.

Mr O'Dowd: I am not sure where to start, because Paul Givan threw me in his introductory remarks. He started off by explaining international law, in his view, as he is perfectly entitled to do. He went on to bring up the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising and his concerns about how they would feel about Sinn Féin's position on Brexit, Europe etc. He carried on to question our republican socialist credentials on the world stage. I sat and listened to him and wondered whether I had entered a different time zone or a world where things had turned upside down.

Then I realised what was going on. It was a classic example of distraction politics: talk about something other than what we want to talk about, or what you do not want to hear your base, your supporters, farmers or factory workers talk about. The reality is that many within the unionist community have serious concerns about Brexit and where the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party that followed the DUP have brought them. We see that in the position that the Ulster Farmers' Union has taken. It is expressing serious concerns. We also see it in the business sector, which is expressing serious concerns about where Brexit has led to, and I am sure that there are serious concerns in Gary Middleton's constituency about where Brexit has led everyone.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will, briefly.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much. I am a bit disappointed that the Member has joined Simon Coveney and various other people in “Unionsplaining”. Members of this party — I am not speaking for other parties on this — know very clearly what our constituents want, and it is not a border down the middle of the Irish Sea.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr O'Dowd: I am not here to question what your constituents want or do not want. You delivered the border down the Irish Sea; I did not. Gentlemen and women on that side of the Chamber delivered the border down the Irish Sea; I did not. That is why I am pointing out the fact that you are trying to distract the debate away from where we are.

Let us move on. I will go back not to 1916 but to 2016, because this point is constantly raised in the Chamber: Sinn Féin did not support the EU in 1970 or the EEC in 1970. It reminds me of some debates among the left, “You didn't do this. You weren't on the barricades when we were on the barricades. Where were you?”. Party politics change or positions evolve. Party debates take place. Changes happen on a global and local scale, and parties move with those changes.

I want to reference 2016. I was on the Executive in 2016, and then I was out. I also sat in the Chamber in 2016, and, as we moved towards the debate on Brexit, the DUP Benches were quite often empty, because a major debate was going on in the DUP as to what position it would take

on Brexit. There were more meetings in the DUP meeting rooms on the third floor than there were in the Chamber as orders came from Westminster on what position the DUP should adopt. DUP MPs in Westminster, who had fallen under the influence of much older, much stranger men in the European Research Group, were sending back word that they needed to support Brexit. In 2016, as the debate was moving forward, the DUP did not even have a position on Brexit.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Not at the moment.

Mr Storey: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr O'Dowd: I will let you in; do not worry about it. The DUP did not have a position on Brexit, and then it adopted, "We will support Brexit". It moved forward and supported Brexit — I will let you in in a moment — and it has brought us to this position. What has it delivered? A potential border down the Irish Sea, economic damage and competition that farmers and the business sector have never seen before.

When the DUP sat in its party room on the third floor, listening to either the pleas or the orders from its MPs to support Brexit, it made a huge mistake. There is always an opportunity to correct that mistake. I will let Mr Storey in, and then I will move on.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for letting me in. I will clarify for the Member that I have been a member of the DUP since I was 15, and we do not take our instructions from London. Unlike the party opposite, we do not have an army council to give us our instructions.

Mr O'Dowd: I have been a member of Sinn Féin since I was 18, and I do not take instructions from anywhere other than the ard-chomhairle of Sinn Féin. That is another distraction from Mr Storey.

The reality is that, in mid-2016, the DUP did not have a position on Brexit until it was told by its MPs in Westminster what it needed to do. Since then, party members have become avid Brexiteers despite what the British Government have done. Mr Aiken said that we are not allowed to Brit-bash. I am not really a Brit-basher, to be honest with you, but Mr Aiken then went on to bash United States politicians, European politicians and Irish politicians. Let us not bash anybody. Let us speak about what has happened, what is happening and what our experiences are.

I will be honest with you: when a British Prime Minister or Minister stands at the Dispatch Box in Westminster and makes a statement, I have real difficulty in believing anything that they tell me because experience has taught me that. That does not mean that there have not been admirable Westminster MPs, Ministers and even Prime Ministers, who stretched themselves for peace in Ireland. I respect them for various parts of that, but we have never been served well from the Dispatch Box in Westminster. That is why we have a local Assembly and come together here to work things out among ourselves.

I recall, when Ian Paisley senior proposed that he and Martin evict the NIO from Stormont Castle, he said, "Martin, you and I can run this place better than anybody". At times, we show the potential for that. We show huge potential for our people, but, as long as the DUP and

others are tied to the right-wing tail of the Tory Party, it will always cause difficulties for this society.

Why do we not govern better for ourselves? Why do we not collectively say, "The will of the people here is this: we should not have Brexit. It is bad for business, bad for farming, bad for our community and bad for investment", and now we have a Government who have turned around once again and are going to break an international agreement — I will come to Mr Allister in a minute — to negotiate with the EU.

They have broken agreements with the DUP and are going to break international agreements, so what is to say that they will not break future agreements with you? Whatever assurances Boris, or whoever, has given to the DUP and others, what is to say that they will not be broken? That brings me back to the point that we are better at governing ourselves than allowing others to do it to us.

Mr Allister, I will not get into a legal argument with a barrister; I have more sense. However, does anybody remember Gina Miller? Gina Miller brought to the Supreme Court a case that argued the point that Parliament was supreme and that its will had to be listened to. The very people who are arguing that Parliament's will is supreme are the very people who demonised Gina Miller. They demonised the woman who ensured that Parliament had a say in the Brexit negotiations and that Parliament was the body that voted on the withdrawal agreement that it is about to break. You cannot have it both ways, folks. You cannot stand here and tell me, an Irish Republican, that Parliament is supreme and then ride on the coat-tails of the people who so harshly criticised Gina Miller for ensuring that your Parliament had a say.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Quickly.

Mr Allister: It was Gina Miller's case that led to the very declaration by the Supreme Court that Parliament is supreme. That created the principle, and that is the principle that informs the recent legislation and the treaty.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member brings me on to my next point. You have a sovereign Parliament whose Government negotiate and endorse an international agreement. You cannot break that agreement. You can have a new negotiation. Your negotiators can negotiate with other countries and bring back a restructured agreement, but you cannot unilaterally break an international agreement.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not giving way, because I have only a minute left.

It leaves you open to criticism and open to suspicion. That leads me on to this point: in the absence of a trade agreement, the part of these islands that will suffer most is here.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: We will suffer the most. Therefore, it is urgent that we all send out this clear message: honour your agreements.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Members.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Speaker: As Members will understand, the social-distancing policies and measures that we have in place make it difficult to call the result of a vote. I am content to put the Question again. If there are still dissenting voices, the House will divide.

Question put a second time.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

5.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, under 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 also remind Members that social distancing should continue to be observed while the Division is taking place. Please be patient at all times and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 46; Noes 38.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Anderson and Dr Archibald.

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 Middleton and Mr Storey.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson [Teller, Ayes], Dr Archibald [Teller, Ayes], Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms 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 McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly is appalled that the British Government have abandoned any pretence of adherence to international law; recognises that the potential for a trade agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom has significantly diminished as a result of the British Government reneging on key elements of the withdrawal agreement; acknowledges that that would be devastating for workers and families, with inevitable business failures, job losses and economic damage; and calls on the British Government to respect the rule of law and honour their obligations in full as set out in the withdrawal agreement that they negotiated and which the British Parliament agreed.

Adjourned at 5.31 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 6 October 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr McAleer: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Minister Poots made a statement yesterday that outlined additional funding for the fishing fleet here. That funding is very welcome for the hard-pressed fishing industry, which has been hugely impacted on by the COVID crisis. The statement was issued as a written statement yesterday morning, yet I note that the Minister was available for the media later in the afternoon.

I suggest that, rather than issue a written statement for such announcements on sitting days, when the Assembly is convened and we are here, it may be more appropriate for the Minister to attend the House in person to make an oral statement so that Members can ask questions and comment on it. I would be grateful if that could be brought to the attention of the Minister and his Department.

Mr Speaker: The Member has made his point. He will know that I have engaged directly with the Executive over a significant period in response, on a number of occasions, to issues raised by members of the Business Committee, other parties' Members and other representatives throughout the Chamber.

I have always pointed out to the Executive, and, indeed, to all Ministers, that, when significant announcements are being made, particularly on plenary sitting days, it is important to respect the conventions and courtesies that need to be afforded to Members.

There is, of course, a balance to be struck in all these matters. I very much welcome, as has the Member, the fact that the written statement was provided to the House in a timely fashion. I have no doubt that the recipients of the funding will welcome the announcement.

There is therefore a balance to be struck on when Members expect Ministers to come to the House. I am on the record as dealing quite well with the matter on behalf of Members and the House. I do not want to lose sight of the fact, however, that we have been seeing a significant increase in statements and interventions, from all Ministers, being made in the Chamber in recent times.

I acknowledge that, and I appreciate that we are getting a significant increase in business from the Executive to the House, as is appropriate.

The Member has made his point. I will continue to liaise with the Executive, as and when the need occurs, to make sure that the House receives the courtesies and respect that it is entitled to.

Ministerial Statements

Upcoming Spending Review and Fiscal Flexibilities

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in the 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. However, if Members wish to be called, they have to ensure that their name is on the speaking list, but they can do this by rising in their place, as well as by notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking questions. This is not an opportunity for debate per se, and long introductions will not be allowed.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): This short statement concerns the upcoming Chancellor's spending review and the wider Westminster funding process. My counterparts in Scotland and Wales and I are collectively making statements to our respective legislatures, setting out our expectations for more fiscal flexibility to manage the implications of COVID-19, proper involvement in the spending review so that we can plan for our Budgets, and a fair deal on EU funding.

Members will be aware that, on 23 September, Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced the cancellation of the autumn Budget. This marks a departure from the normal convention of two fiscal statements a year, which provided a degree of certainty to the financial process. While that move in itself was concerning, of greater concern to the Executive is the continued lack of clarity over the upcoming spending review. Since the announcement of the spending review on 21 July, I have been concerned about the omission of a date by which the process would be concluded. The Chancellor spoke about "autumn" but, going by previous Treasury statements, "autumn" can mean anything up to the second week in December.

I will briefly outline why the spending review outcome date is so important to the Executive and the House. The spending review outcome is the first time that we will get an idea of what the overarching Budget envelope will be for the Executive for the coming years. Without that information, it is impossible to plan effectively. The delay in the spending review leads to a delay in the local Budget process, making it harder for Ministers to plan effectively for the years ahead. This is made all the more acute by the uncertainty around COVID-19. Today, we collectively ask

the British Government for urgent clarity around the timing and scope of the spending review. In a period where future implications of COVID-19 are uncertain, it is imperative that the Government provide as much clarity as possible on the spending review process, the outcome and the flexibility that will be afforded to us to respond to COVID-19 in the current year and within our future Budget envelope.

This is not a situation unique to our Executive. The Scottish and Welsh Governments are faced with similar problems in planning for the future. Today, we collectively ask the British Government to provide the full suite of flexibilities that we need to manage the unprecedented ongoing uncertainty that we face. I recognise that, for different devolved Administrations, that might mean different solutions. For the Executive to be able to respond effectively to the impacts of COVID-19 in this year and future years, it will be necessary for us to have flexibility to transfer capital funding into resource budgets. This will allow the Executive the agility that they need to respond to changes that will materially impact on public service provision.

In addition, I call for the Treasury to loosen the restrictions around transferring funding from one year to the next. Under the current rules, any underspend over 0.6% of our resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) budget or 1.5% of our capital DEL budget is lost to the Executive. That restriction does not encourage good financial management and risks year-end surges of spend as Departments seek to ensure that budgets are maximised. A relaxation of the rules around year-end underspend would allow Departments more flexibility to manage underspends. This is especially relevant in a period when the impact of COVID-19 can lead to a disruption in projects, working practices and supply chains. These are limited and logical requests.

The concerns that I have outlined are further exacerbated by Brexit. Planning for 2021 would be challenging enough without the further uncertainty surrounding Brexit — uncertainty that is within the British Government's gift to clarify. Some three months before the end of the transition period, we do not have the clarity that we need on key issues such as implementing the protocol and replacing EU funding. I have written to the Treasury outlining the costs of implementing the protocol and have yet to receive confirmation that those costs will be met by the British Government, as they promised. I also await detail on the shared prosperity fund, the much-vaunted replacement for certain EU funding.

The one significant piece of legislation that the British Government have produced recently, the Internal Market Bill, represents a power grab in areas of devolved responsibilities. Our devolution arrangements are underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement, an international treaty, so this is an extremely serious development. Today, we are collectively asking for assurances that the British Government will provide full replacement funding for EU programmes without detriment to devolution. The issues that I have raised today are integral to the Executive's future budget plans and are issues that urgently need to be resolved.

I call on the Chancellor to provide the much-needed certainty that this House requires and that our Scottish and Welsh counterparts need. As Finance Ministers, we represent over 10 million people, and, today, we speak with one voice. We are calling for more fiscal flexibility to

manage the implications of COVID-19; we are calling for proper involvement in the spending review so that we can plan our Budgets; and we are calling for lost EU funding to be replaced in full and brought under local control.

In normal times, this uncertainty would not be helpful, but the lack of clarity is further compounded as we deal with COVID and Brexit. The Treasury must urgently provide the clarity that we need. I commend this statement to the House.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his statement and also for meeting me earlier today to talk about these issues. I think that it is very clear that, as COVID impacts on all of us in Northern Ireland, we need to understand how we have flexibility, and we need to get clarity. Will the Minister commit to working very closely with the Finance Committee to look at the detail and the understanding of this information as it comes through, particularly when it looks to the moving and transferring of moneys within budget, bearing in mind the past record that we have in Northern Ireland on that, and also on the details of the shared prosperity fund?

Finally, as the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, I welcome the fact that the Minister sees the benefit of being part of the Union and of dealing directly with our Chancellor, who is having to spend a considerable amount of resource in dealing with the challenges of COVID.

Mr Murphy: I am happy to cooperate, as I have done, with the Finance Committee and provide it with the information that it requires and which we require. The problem is that we do not have that yet. We do not have that certainty around flexibility. Flexibility is always beneficial, but, in the year that we are in, where we not only have uncertainty around COVID and the ability of Departments to spend money that we have supplied to them in the Budget, but we have an additional amount of about £2.2 billion of COVID money, to date, to spend in the financial year, a very significant pressure is placed on Departments to spend, so that type of flexibility would be very helpful. We are not certain yet about what the outcome might look like once we move into the new year, but we want to be prepared to manage any pressures that we have.

We have quite a lot of good words and goodwill about what the shared prosperity fund might look like, but we have no certainty around that at all. We are particularly alarmed by the clause in the Internal Market Bill that suggests that allocating that funding to specific projects here would rest with Whitehall. We have a very clear view, as have Scotland and Wales, and it is the view of our Executive that the shared prosperity fund would be administered and allocated by the Executive through its various Departments and partners, through which we currently allocate EU funding. That must be adhered to.

I will not rise to the point that he made as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. When we in Sinn Féin get up and talk about these issues, we are accused of politicising COVID, yet we are constantly lectured about the benefits of the precious Union. Let us see how it works out in the time ahead.

Mr Frew: The Minister makes several requests to the Government, none of which I could disagree with, but, when he calls for proper involvement in the spending review, the same could be said of this Assembly and the

Finance Committee having proper involvement in the Executive's Budget process. The Department has, over the past few months, proven how agile it can be in delivering and spending additional moneys in year. There is no excuse for the current delay in the Budget process and the lack of detail being provided to the Committee and, indeed, this House. The Minister may be right when he says that he has no idea about what could be in the spending review, but he is always proving that he has no clue about bringing forward a Budget to this place. When will the Minister publish details on the Budget?

Mr Murphy: I am, perhaps, as confused as most people listening to you may be. I am saying clearly that we do not know what the funding envelope is. We are not absolutely certain whether we are going to have a three-year resource Budget and a four-year capital Budget. We have been told that that is the case, but there are other signals coming out of Treasury to say that that might not be the case.

The Member wants me to provide a Budget in that context. If that is the sort of Budget that he wants, in the hope that we know what we have, it would have to be a made-up Budget. Or, does he want us to pursue Treasury to get the certainty that we need to allow us to plan, hopefully for the next three years for resource and the next four years for capital; to get that as early as we possibly can; in doing so, to go out to consult with his Committee, other Committees and generally on a draft Budget; and to produce the Budget in legislation here in the springtime? That is the normal Budget process. I am not sure why the Member does not understand that; he has been on the Finance Committee for long enough.

10.45 am

Our concern here is to get certainty around the funding envelope. That comes from London. If that certainty is not there, it makes it difficult for us to plan. That is not unique to us; I am having that conversation with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. They are experiencing exactly the same problems in giving Budget certainty to their own institutions. That is why we are making the statement collectively today.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don Aire as a ráiteas fosta. I thank the Minister for his statement. It is important that the Executive can plan their Budget over a number of years. Is it the Minister's understanding that the Treasury still intends to set a multi-annual Budget of three years for resource and four years for capital?

Mr Murphy: That is certainly our hope. With our own Budget spend, we have operated for the past number of years on annual Budgets. That does not give any long-term certainty, particularly for capital projects. We have significant capital projects here that the Executive want to get on with. They are flagship projects that will make a huge difference to economic recovery and regeneration right across the region. The certainty that a three-year resource Budget and four-year capital Budget gives us — not only us but industry, construction and all those sectors — is very important. We had been operating on the basis that that was the case. Then, signals came out of Treasury, because there is a confused picture there, that it might not be the case. The other week, I raised that directly with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. He said that that was the basis on which they were operating, which, I suppose,

is certainty of a type, but not the certainty that we want. That is why we intend to engage directly with him — to get that certainty. It is impossible for us to plan ahead if we do not even know the time frame, much less the funding envelope, that we have.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for coming to the Assembly today. Can he be a little more specific about the two flexibilities for which he seems to be asking? He mentioned in-year flexibility around capital resource, which can also carry forward to spending in the next financial year. First, can he be slightly more specific about what he is actually asking the Treasury for in that regard? Secondly, what specific correspondence has he had with the Chancellor and anyone else in the UK Government about mitigation costs and paying the costs of EU exit?

Mr Murphy: What we want, in the first instance, is for the principle of flexibility to be agreed. We have not had that agreed. At the moment, we do not know the level of flexibility that we might need. Some of that is the conversion of capital to resource and some is the flexibility to extend into the next financial year. Departments are very busy trying to spend out their COVID money and budgets. We have an October monitoring round exercise going on. Of course, we have a January monitoring round scheduled as well. When we get to those stages, I think that we will know the degree of flexibility that we might require to transfer money between capital and resource and to carry over into the next financial year. We will have greater clarity. However, the principle of flexibility is one that we need to establish with Treasury. That is why we are pressing that issue very hard.

I did send a cost for the protocol and EU exit to the Treasury. It said that it would look at the business case for that. I know that DAERA is providing additional figures for some of the costs for which it will have responsibility. The Treasury said that it would meet those costs in full. However, as yet, we have no firm commitment on the costs that we have sent it.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. I fully support all efforts that are being made to ensure that we have the necessary financial firepower here, in this place, to safeguard both lives and livelihoods. If we are granted the measures that are outlined, they will be welcome. However, what efforts are being made to establish a fiscal council? It was a commitment in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA). It is important that there is oversight of Northern Ireland's finances as we enter an even more difficult period over the winter.

Mr Murphy: As I have told the House on a number of occasions, the fiscal council is a New Decade, New Approach commitment, and we will meet it. As with a lot of Departments and the commitments under New Decade, New Approach, things have slipped because of COVID and the necessity for all Departments to focus entirely on meeting the challenges that COVID has presented, but we have already begun again the work on the fiscal council, and I hope to be able to bring a proposition to the Executive on that very soon. I am also looking at the idea of a fiscal commission that can propose things such as additional tax-varying powers for the Assembly, as has happened in Wales and Scotland, and I hope to bring a proposal on both matters in the very near future.

Mr Givan: I welcome the announcement that three Ministers in component parts of the United Kingdom, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, are speaking with one voice on this issue. I have some sympathy with the Minister in seeking certainty and more clarity on the Budget. In doing that, the Minister is asking for more fiscal flexibility in order to manage the implications of COVID-19. How concerned is the Minister that, when seeking greater flexibility to access more schemes, that effort is being undermined when Treasury can look, for example, at the SDLP Minister, who failed to access Treasury funding that would have furloughed staff in Translink and saved the Executive millions of pounds, given that businesses, not least those in the north-west, have been starved of that money and could be accessing that financial support?

Mr Murphy: I will not involve myself in any critique of the Infrastructure Minister's responsibilities. That is a matter for her and her Department.

We are making very general arguments about Budget planning and managing the finances that we have. I will talk again to the Finance Ministers from Scotland and Wales at lunchtime today, and we have consistently expressed those messages and others to the Treasury. Our concern about that is heightened by the fact that there will now not be a Budget in the autumn. Our concern about EU funding is heightened by the Internal Market Bill, and that is why we felt that we had to speak today with one voice to reinforce the messages that we have been consistently giving. These are very high-level issues that face not only our Administration here but those in Scotland and Wales, and we are trying to press home the need for a broad level of fiscal flexibility in order to assist us in managing our Budgets.

Mr Lynch: Will the Minister give us an indication of the scale of the EU funding and the parts that he is trying to protect?

Mr Murphy: The total scale — this is between 2014 and 2020 — is in the region of €4 billion. Some of that falls under our ongoing PEACE PLUS programme, which takes up what would have been the Peace funding and the INTERREG funding, and the proposition for that is around €650 million. That fund will continue to be delivered locally. The rest of that funding is made up of the replacement of CAP, which goes on until next year, and a range of other EU funding that, I am sure, the Member will be familiar with.

Our concern is that the promise was that we would have full access to that amount — that is, the funding that we previously had — and that we would have the ability to design the programmes for that and to allocate the funding and work with our own local partners in doing so. The intention of the Internal Market Bill seems to take us in a different direction, which is very concerning, and we intend to press that point with the British Government.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Finance Minister for his statement. Obviously, COVID-19 has created unprecedented challenges for the Budget and particularly for the Health and Economy Departments. The Minister may be aware that the Royal College of Surgeons made a call asking for the ring-fencing of beds in order to allow essential surgery to continue through future waves of COVID-19. What plans does the Minister's Department have, in conjunction with the Health Department, to ensure that the necessary funds are in place to allow that

essential surgery to continue and to address waiting lists as we go into the future?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know from previous statements that I have made to the House that we have centrally held £600 million for the Health Department. It had been making its own assessments of what it needs for its response to the pandemic, and, obviously, that assessment will have increased given the resurgence in the prevalence of COVID in the community. Another element of that was to try to assist in redeveloping and supporting other health services. There is a significant amount of money. This £600 million is on top of, I think, something in the region of £300 million of COVID money that we have already given to the Health Department and the budget that Health got at the end of March, which was obviously the largest departmental budget of all.

There is a significant resource, but I recognise, as the Member will, that Health is recovering from nine years of austerity. It has been deeply and consistently under-resourced, and we are trying to meet that challenge. We have ring-fenced that money, and the Health Department will come forward with its spending plans for that. That £600 million has to be spent within this financial year. If all the money is not required, some will be returned to the centre for distribution elsewhere. It is a significant amount of money on top of the budget that Health has already received.

Ms Dolan: One of the reasons that it has been difficult to provide extra financial support for workers during the COVID crisis is the lack of tax data. Does the Minister agree that, if we had more tax powers and more tax information, we could do more to help our constituents?

Mr Murphy: Should we want to do specific tailored programmes for our workers, we are restricted by the fact that that data is held by HMRC. In order to devise any scheme to assist people with employment costs, we would have to work with HMRC to verify any claim. It is a challenging exercise to get HMRC to do that, specifically for a bespoke scheme. Other Departments have looked at schemes to support employees. We had the furlough scheme, which is due to run out at the end of the month. There is also an employment support scheme, which, in my view, comes nowhere close to approaching the same level of support for employees and employers, and we will see increased redundancies as a result of that. Undoubtedly, the more data to which we have access, the more levers we would have in raising our own finances. We would also be more able to set programmes that are tailored to the needs of the people who live here.

Mr Catney: Thank you for coming to the Chamber, Minister. There has been no guarantee of funding for the employment and skills support in Northern Ireland that is currently funded by the European social fund. As yet, there is no clarity on how and when that funding will be replaced. What is the Department's understanding, in talking to the affected sectors, of the real pressures that they are under?

Mr Murphy: The Department for the Economy has responsibility for bringing forward propositions on skills and employment. My job, on behalf of the Executive, is to secure funding. That is why it is not only important that we secure the level of funding that would have come here in other circumstances through Europe but important, as we are being taken out of Europe against our wishes, that we have to try to secure that funding. The British Government

have promised to replace it in full. We have a unique set of circumstances, which the Member recognises, in the levels of support. We want to target those levels of support for skills, particularly towards younger people in training, apprenticeships and all those things. We need to be able to manage, allocate and administer our own schemes and to make sure that they go to where they are most needed. Those are the key principles. The level of support and the engagement with that sector in devising those plans is a matter for the Department for the Economy.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Minister clarify exactly whom he envisages taking local control for lost EU funding? Is it the son of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) or the Minister? As for replacing it in full, were we not told that we would be better off outside the European Union? Does the Minister accept that his position lacks a certain ambition?

Mr Murphy: I am going on the statement that was provided that it would be replaced in full. We were told that the contribution that the British Government make to the EU would be a net gain for the British state in what they could give back to public services. Perhaps we were sold a pup — not those of us who voted to remain — when we saw the writing on the side of the bus. If there is more than a replacement in full, I would be very happy. That is the statement that was given about a replacement in full.

The Member asked about who will administer the scheme. We want to ensure that we have the shared prosperity fund, and it will then be up to the Executive to design programmes around it and give it to the appropriate Department to administer. Finance has a role, and we have a role in relation to the SEUPB, which, as the Member will know, is a cross-border body. The Irish Government, through the Department of Finance and other Departments, have a role in that. It is a specific programme that relates to the Six Counties and the six border counties. The shared prosperity fund will probably be more internal to the North.

In the first instance, we want to ensure the full replacement of funding and the principle that the devolved Administrations are responsible for the design of the programmes, the allocation of the funding and the partnerships. I look forward to our having as broad a range of partnerships as we can with councils and other social partners in designing and administering those programmes.

11.00 am

Dr Archibald: I welcome the Minister's statement today. The Minister referenced the Internal Market Bill. He and the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers have already raised concerns about it providing to Westminster financial powers that are over and above those of the Assembly and Executive. What is the Minister's assessment of the impact that the Internal Market Bill will have on our ability to control our spending?

Mr Murphy: The concerns relate to the principle attached to the level of funding. We were told that we would receive that funding in full. The Internal Market Bill gives the British Government powers to administer those schemes. That directly contradicts the commitment as it was understood by Wales, Scotland and us, which was that the devolved Administrations would get that share of the funding,

be responsible for designing and administering those programmes, involving the partners that we chose, and that we would target that money to match Executive and Government priorities here. The powers contained in a clause of the Westminster Bill seem to contradict that. That is very worrying not only for us but for Scotland, Wales, as is clear from my ongoing dialogue with their Finance Ministers. We want to ensure that our understanding of the commitment to the devolved Administrations and the funding principle is met by the British Government and that the power to decide these programmes and allocate the funding is not held in Whitehall. That is a clear contravention of what we agreed.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, will you give us your assessment of how the current situation impacts on the Department of Health's ability to deliver services, which will be particularly important in the second wave of COVID? Have you started any conversations with Whitehall about funding for the next financial year?

Mr Murphy: The conversations with Whitehall on the spending review will lead to conversations for the next financial year, and, hopefully, the next three years on resource and four years on capital. That is why we want as much clarity as possible. Traditionally, the devolved Administrations have not been involved in the spending review conversations. However, the fact that there is no autumn Budget increases the importance of having early sight of the spending plans, their time frame and the funding envelope that we will operate within. That will give us the clarity to plan in the way that you describe.

I cannot make the assessment because that is for the Department of Health. The Executive had prioritised Health even before COVID became a factor. In discussions on the reinstatement of the Executive, there was agreement from all parties that Health would be a priority. We have done that in the Budget allocation, and, in the COVID allocations, we have added significant money for Health. As I said in an earlier answer, we have £600 million held centrally for Health, and it is assessing how to spend that on the COVID response and ongoing support for other health services. We expect to be able to announce fairly soon how much of that Health requires and whether any of it can be returned to the centre for further allocation.

Mr O'Dowd: I will follow on from Mr Nesbitt's question about the elusive savings that were associated with Brexit. It is now clear that there will be a public administration cost to deal with Brexit. How will the Minister's Department deal with the additional cost associated with Brexit?

Mr Murphy: Our business plan is based on what we estimate to be the cost of our implementing the protocol, and there are costs to implementing that. The Treasury has said that it will meet those costs but has not yet committed to agreeing the figures that we sent to it. DAERA is doing further work on the figures associated with its element of that. You are right: there is a cost of implementing the protocol. Undoubtedly, on this island, there will be a cost to the economy from Brexit itself, which is very hard to quantify until we see the final outcome of those negotiations. The cost could be very severe or less severe but there will be a cost.

Clearly, the promise that Mr Nesbitt referred to of not only having that funding returned but having much more funding to spend across public services here does not seem to

have materialised in any dialogue that we have had with the Treasury.

Mr Allister: I suppose that the Treasury is always an easy target for devolved institutions, although there may not always be a matching acknowledgement of the scale of financial assistance, particularly during COVID-19. On the point about the capacity to transfer from capital to resource, is the Minister looking for that only during the COVID-19 emergency or as a long-term change? If it is to be a long-term change, would legislative change be required?

Mr Murphy: It would be more beneficial to make a long-term change, because, as the Member will know from his experience here and as most Members who have been here long enough will know, we get into a situation from January to March where there is kind of a spending surge. Of course, the dynamic behind that is that we do not want to surrender money to Treasury because Departments are criticised for not spending it. It is right that we are asked whether we are spending it on the right things. Are we planning sufficiently, or are we just spending to get rid of the money because we would be criticised for not spending it? Does that have a proper, positive outcome in the long term?

A longer-term flexibility would be beneficial, and we will discuss with Treasury whether that requires legislation. I am happy to take that issue forward. It would be more beneficial to us in the long term. We have a particular situation this year because we have additional money for COVID-19. I have acknowledged in the Chamber how, from an Irish republican perspective, I feel that the COVID-19 allocations from Treasury have been beneficial. I felt that the furlough scheme was very beneficial, as was the loan scheme for businesses. However, we are taxpayers, so, if Treasury is distributing its largesse around those who pay into the British Treasury, we are entitled to some of it. It would be much more beneficial for us to have that capacity in the long term, because we are in a cycle, particularly with annual Budgets, where we end up having a spending splurge at the end of year. That is not good for long-term planning, and it is not good for making the best use of our limited public funding. It would be much better done in the long term. We will explore with Treasury whether that requires legislation.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease while we prepare the Chamber for the next item on the Order Paper. Thank you.

Surge Planning Strategic Framework

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health that he wishes to make a statement.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to update the House on my Department's surge planning agenda.

Today, I am publishing a new surge planning strategic framework that is intended to set the overarching context for individual trust surge and winter planning. Alongside the framework, I am publishing individual trust surge plans. The coming period is highly uncertain, and the recent increase in COVID-19 cases is deeply concerning and shows that further waves are a continuing threat. How the virus develops in the coming weeks and months will depend on a range of factors, including the future approach to social distancing and population adherence to measures that include washing hands often and well, good respiratory practice and the appropriate use of face coverings.

Given the sheer scale of the unknown, I believe that the health and social care system coped well through the first COVID-19 wave. That was largely because of the public's strong adherence to the measures put in place to counter the spread of the virus, meaning that the impact on services was not as severe as initially feared. Another important factor was attendances at emergency departments reducing significantly during that period, which released capacity to assist with managing the pandemic. That may not be the case in the coming months, particularly as we move into the winter.

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

While the future path of the pandemic is unclear, a second wave, as I have already indicated, will likely coincide with winter pressures. That means that our health and social care system is very likely to face the most challenging winter that it has ever experienced. The planning for the initial surge was carried out at a time when there was limited data available on the pandemic's trajectory. In that context, plans were put in place to deal with an extreme level of surge. As a result of that planning, every patient requiring treatment for COVID-19 was able to receive it. However, the creation of so much additional capacity had a significant impact on other Health and Social Care (HSC) services. The scale of that impact is outlined in 'Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services: Strategic Framework'.

Sadly, as of yesterday, 584 of our fellow citizens had passed away with COVID-19. No matter how long the pandemic continues, we must never forget that behind every figure was a person who was loved and who is now sorely missed. My sincere condolences go out to the families and loved ones of those who have tragically passed away. Our tribute to them, as a community, must be to ensure that we take all necessary action to minimise the rate of infection and future loss of life. That starts with us all taking personal responsibility for our behaviour and actions in fighting this dreadful virus.

Our nurses, doctors, paramedics, other allied health professionals (AHPs), community pharmacists, care workers, primary care workers and other front-line health and social care workers and carers have bravely and tirelessly put themselves at risk to save the lives of others. Amongst them were those who volunteered to return to

work or to leave training temporarily to provide much help and support. I cannot thank our workers enough for that. I know that I can rely on continued commitment from all staff as we begin the task of managing future COVID-19 waves. Having said that, I appreciate that the efforts to date have taken their toll. We must put staff welfare, along with patient safety, at the heart of our efforts to manage services.

As I said in my opening remarks, I am deeply concerned about the increase in the number of infections in recent days and weeks. In parallel with preparing our health and social care services for future COVID-19 waves, I will not hesitate to bring recommendations to the Executive, as I did last week, for a tightening of social-distancing measures, should that be necessary. We all have an important role to play in stopping the spread of the virus. I ask the people of Northern Ireland to maintain adherence to the social-distancing rules, continue to wash their hands often and practise good respiratory hygiene. I know that the vast majority do so, and I cannot overstate the importance of that.

I also urge all Northern Ireland residents who have not already done so to download the StopCOVID NI app. Well in excess of 415,000 people had downloaded the app as of yesterday, and over 5,700 people have received exposure notifications asking them to self-isolate. It is a key plank of our test, trace and protect strategy and a valuable source of up-to-date information. If we all play our part, I am confident that we can defeat the pandemic. In the meantime, my job is to ensure that our health and social care services are prepared to care for anyone who needs treatment or contracts the virus. The publication of the surge planning strategic framework is a key step in ensuring just that.

11.15 am

I will now highlight key aspects of the surge planning strategic framework that I am publishing today. The framework provides the overall structure and parameters within which HSC trusts have developed their individual plans for managing the response to COVID-19 in the event of future waves. The framework highlights important learning from the first wave; sets out the approach to surveillance and modelling; reviews actions to minimise COVID-19 transmission and impact; summarises key regional initiatives to organise health and social care services to facilitate effective service delivery; highlights actions around the key issues of workforce, medicines and testing; and confirms a number of principles for our health and social care trusts to adopt when developing their individual surge plans.

It is important to recognise that Northern Ireland-specific data and modelling will continue to be used to enable efficient planning and to ensure that there is early warning of any impact on health and social care services. Using the available data, combined with surveillance of influenza and other winter diseases, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser will continue to advise the Executive as they consider measures to reduce the R number in the event of a significant and sustained increase in the epidemic. With that approach, the intention is to ensure that the system is equipped to deal with a significant increase in demand, but also to keep the level of demand manageable in order to prevent our health and

care services becoming overwhelmed. In order to manage future COVID-19 surges, HSC must be organised and ready to respond. To ensure that services are delivered most effectively in the COVID-19 context, the Department has taken a number of initiatives that adopt regional approaches to service delivery.

A number of key regional initiatives are outlined in the surge planning strategic framework. Those include establishing dedicated centres for day case and orthopaedic procedures and the establishment of a regional cancer reset cell to oversee the resumption of screening, diagnosis and treatment of cancer patients in clinically safe environments as quickly as possible and to protect those services as much as possible in the event of future potential surges of COVID-19. They also include action to capture learning in relation to care homes to mitigate future transmission of the virus in those settings; the continued availability of the critical care capacity at our first Nightingale facility at Belfast City Hospital; the additional step-down capacity at our second Nightingale facility at Whiteabbey Hospital; a much-expanded testing capacity; and the publication of our Test, Trace, Protect, Support strategy. The Nightingale facilities are particularly relevant for surge planning, and I will say more about my plans next.

The Belfast City Hospital tower block was designated as Northern Ireland's first Nightingale and will maintain additional ICU capacity for future COVID-19 waves. It should be noted that this additional ICU capacity will only be needed in the event of an extreme surge in demand for intensive care. The Belfast City Hospital tower will remain a protected site for cancer and other specialist surgery for as long as possible.

The experience of the first surge identified a role for additional step-down capacity to support flow through hospitals and to ease pressures on the system. Therefore, as Members will know, I have already commissioned work to begin on an additional Nightingale facility on the Whiteabbey Hospital site. That will be an intermediate care facility, providing 100 additional step-down beds, to be operational by December 2020.

Some Members will have heard of the latest report published by the Royal College of Surgeons, which focuses on the delivery of surgery through a second wave. Whilst the report may be largely focused on England it also, importantly, contains the views of surgeons from Northern Ireland. The report is an important contribution at this time, especially as it is coming from clinicians who are working on the front line. I will meet the royal college tomorrow morning, just as I have done on a number of occasions before, and I am quite certain that the report will be discussed then. I have also asked that the report and its recommendations are discussed at tomorrow's meeting of the regional management board.

A particular point that I fully expect will be discussed tomorrow, and which is referenced on page 22 of the report, is in relation to staffing. The responses from our surgeons highlight the significant impact that workforce shortages are having on the capacity to deliver planned care. That was a problem before COVID and will remain so after COVID, but the pandemic has only exacerbated it. Almost all of the surgeons who responded to the survey specifically mentioned the need for more nursing staff to increase surgical capacity. It is clear that there

are no quick fixes and that sustainable, multi-year funding is required. Earlier this year, I was pleased to secure funding to deliver an additional 300 nursing and midwifery undergraduate places in Northern Ireland this year, bringing the total to an all-time high of 1,325. In the meantime, I will continue to do everything that I can to train and entice nurses to work in our HSC system.

I recognise that it may be difficult to find any positives in the situation that we find ourselves in, but we must recognise that the emergency response across primary, community and secondary care services has involved innovative new service-delivery approaches. Our health and social care providers have adopted the use of technology like never before. Although face-to-face consultations will always be necessary in some cases, and, indeed, are valued by clinicians and patients, I am reassured that virtual clinics and telephone triage are widely embedded in primary and secondary care services. We cannot go back to the way in which we delivered services before COVID-19. There is now an opportunity to mainstream the recent innovations, and I am determined that we will take that opportunity.

Of course, we must recognise that the use of technology will not be appropriate in all circumstances, and we must continue to offer face-to-face services where that makes sense for patients and staff alike. Our primary and secondary care providers have also stepped up to collaborate in ways not previously seen. That is best exemplified in the eleven COVID-19 centres that were established as a response to the crisis. We must now build on those experiences to further encourage that collaboration. Innovation, transformation and collaboration will be at the very heart of my approach to managing a second wave.

Before I move on to the trust surge plans, it is important to pay tribute to all the carers who have supported their loved ones through this very difficult time. You have done a fantastic job in a very challenging environment. We must continue to support carers through the coming period, which is likely to be at least as difficult as the last six months. Carers will have a crucial role to play in continuing to provide support, not only to those whom they care for but also in terms of taking pressure off our hospitals and healthcare workers.

I am announcing today the publication of five individual trust surge plans and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service surge plan. Those plans all outline initiatives required to respond to additional demand pressures that will arise during the winter and through any subsequent COVID-19 waves. Each plan covers a number of themes to support the HSC system to deliver increased resilience throughout this challenging winter period. The themes include positive patient, service-user and carers' experience; protecting HSC staff; maximising capacity; and promoting safety for patients and staff alike. I have highlighted the key aspects of the surge planning strategic framework and the individual surge plans that I am publishing today. That will ensure that comprehensive plans are in place to address future COVID-19 surges and winter pressures.

Our waiting times were appalling before COVID-19, and, regrettably, they will be even worse after it. That is why I made it clear to my officials and the trusts that restarting services was to be considered a key priority for them.

COVID can cause real harm, but so, too, can delayed diagnosis or treatment. Thankfully, through the Herculean efforts of our clinicians and the administrative staff working across our trusts, much progress was made. For instance, from 1 July to 31 August this year, trusts committed, under their planning, to deliver 130,419 outpatient consultations. In fact, they delivered 152,941. Similarly, they aimed to deliver 61,678 diagnostics; they delivered 81,874.

I do not underestimate for one moment the damage that COVID-19 has inflicted. That is why I said that I wanted any and all possible sources of additional capacity to be utilised, including capacity in the independent sector. From the onset of the pandemic, trusts have been using theatre sessions, including for both general anaesthetic lists and local anaesthetic lists, to allow many hundreds of the most urgent and time-critical patients to proceed as quickly as possible.

When I established the management board for rebuilding HSC services in June, I also tasked it with incrementally increasing HSC service capacity as quickly as possible across all programmes of care. The management board is currently overseeing 28 work streams. It is clear that huge efforts are under way to rebuild services. I do not underestimate either the scale of the challenge or the needs of patients who unfortunately have had their treatment delayed.

The next set of trust three-month rebuild plans were originally intended to be published at this time, covering the period October to December. However, given the perilous and developing situation that we now find ourselves in, I feel that we have no choice but to hold back the publication of the latest plans. However, let me reassure Members that, just because the publication of the plans may be paused, that does not for one moment suggest that the efforts of our clinicians to support patients have been paused. Even with the prevailing COVID situation, I expect that the rebuilding effort will, of course, continue, as far as that is possible. I will also keep the publication of the rebuild plans under ongoing review. That said, it must be recognised that the recent rapid increase in COVID-19 infections is likely to unavoidably impact on the capacity of our health system to maintain delivery of mainstream services.

I intend to publish tomorrow a policy statement setting out important plans for rebuilding and stabilising cancer services. While we have greatly improved our cancer treatment services with increasing numbers of patients surviving cancer for longer periods, regrettably, our waiting times for diagnosis and treatment have been deteriorating in recent years. HSC cancer services, primarily oncology, have been under pressure for some years. There are a number of reasons for the existing pressures, including staff vacancies and sickness absence. In addition, the service is being supported by single-handed practitioners and locums, which makes it vulnerable.

Unfortunately, the impact of COVID-19 on the health and social care system has also been profound. The continued need to adhere to social distancing and the level of use of personal protective equipment (PPE) not required before the pandemic have all contributed. While every effort has been made by the HSC trusts to prioritise both red-flag and urgent patient referrals, it will require some time to return those services to delivering the full available capacity.

Alongside the development of the new cancer strategy, healthcare commissioners, professional staff and the trusts have been working to produce short- and medium-term plans to rebuild and stabilise cancer services. Both oncology and haematology services are under unprecedented pressure as a result of the continued growth in demand for services and the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential that we invest now to create sustainable teams that can provide high quality and timely care.

The aim of those plans is to take immediate action to increase capacity and ensure that the services are sustained over the weeks and months ahead as we face the potential for a second wave of COVID-19. The rebuilding plan for cancer services contains 17 actions to maximise available capacity across all cancer services. The immediate need is to rebuild services following the COVID-19 first wave and maintain service delivery for red-flag and urgent referrals for the year ahead. The estimated investment for the rebuilding plan is £2.5 million revenue recurrent and £151,000 capital.

The oncology and haematology stabilisation plans are focused on filling medical, nursing and allied health professional vacancies, investing in new ways of working and creating new navigator posts to support the continued delivery of virtual clinics. The overall estimated cost of the oncology stabilisation plan is £8.73 million over two years. The overall estimated cost of the haematology stabilisation plan is £3.63 million also over two years. While this work will initially be supported through COVID funding, it is important to note that these are not short-term actions. The Executive have agreed that this investment will be rolled out across two years through to March 2022 and be recurrently funded from 2022-23.

There is an urgent need to rebuild cancer services, and these plans complement one another by providing a strong base for the long-term implementation plan that underpins the cancer strategy that is called for in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

11.30 am

Mr Speaker, in conclusion, be in no doubt that we are confronted with a huge and daunting challenge. We must, as a system, try to rebuild services, manage the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, embed innovation and transformation, address winter pressures and plan for the future all at the same time. We demonstrated during the first COVID-19 wave, despite the limited time to prepare, that we are up for the challenge. It is due to the dedication of all our health and social care staff that anyone who has contracted this terrible virus has had access to the best possible care. I am determined that that will continue to be the case.

I am immensely proud of all our health and social care staff. I will say this to them: you responded selflessly and with conviction to the first COVID-19 wave. The period that we are now facing is likely to be hugely challenging, but I have no doubt that our HSC staff will again respond positively to the challenge. It will be critical to adopt a flexible approach in order to ensure that mainstream health and social care service delivery is maximised as far as possible. Our ability to protect mainstream health and social care services will, at least in part, be determined by everyone responding positively in order to control the

spread of the virus. I urge everyone across the community to go that extra mile this winter by following the guidance on infection prevention and to not let our guard slip.

I assure the House that I will bring to bear all the leadership and encouragement that I can offer as we move through what will undoubtedly be an increasingly testing period for health and social care. Mr Speaker, I commend the 'Surge Planning Strategic Framework' and trust surge plans to the House.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Go raibh maith agat, Minister, for coming to the Assembly to make the statement and for taking the time to meet me and the Deputy Chair earlier to discuss Health issues.

I join you in offering condolences to all who have suffered the loss of loved ones as a result of this horrible virus. I also recognise that, hopefully, we are in a different place this time. While we face a very worrying situation, we have an active test-and-trace system in place. It is crucial that it keeps pace with demand in the time ahead and meets the challenges that it is facing. I also hope that we are in a different place with PPE. I welcome the ongoing work on the dedicated day-case and orthopaedic centres and the commitment to protect services from shutdown as much as possible while recognising that there are issues with orthopaedics in the Western Trust.

Minister, the Committee has heard that one of the key differences in places that have fared better than here in suppressing the virus is the availability of isolation facilities to provide people, such as those in high multiple-occupancy houses or younger people, with support where they find it difficult to isolate at home or to return home to isolate. Is the Minister willing to look into that? It may be something that we can improve upon.

Can the Minister tell us more about what is different for care homes this time around and what plans are in place to ensure, for example, safe discharge from hospital into what we recognise as the very vulnerable setting of care homes?

Mr Swann: I again thank the Chair for his and his Committee's support through what has been a challenging time. We do not have bespoke provision in Northern Ireland for anyone who has to self-isolate, but as I said when we met earlier, that is a conversation that I am willing to have with the Communities Minister to see what can be done.

One of the provisions of our Nightingale step-down facility in Whiteabbey, when it is opened, will allow those who are transferring from hospital settings to have another facility to go to that will separate them from mainstream hospital provision but that will also prevent them having to go into care home settings.

On the specifics of transfers from hospitals to care homes, paragraph 27 of the latest version of the care homes guidance states:

"All patients being discharged from hospital to a care home should be tested for COVID-19, ideally this test will be done 48 hours prior to discharge. In addition those patients/residents who are entering a care home through another route (e.g. from home or from a supported living service) should be tested in advance

of their entry in to the care home. Ideally this test will also be done 48 hours prior to entry into the care home.”

That is to make sure that anybody who is entering a care home has been tested and that the self-isolation does take place, as suggested.

The Member asks what we have learned about care homes. The rapid learning initiative, which is a piece of work on care homes that is led by the Chief Nursing Officer, identified a number of issues that we have learned from and picked up on. They relate to PPE, bringing GPs into care homes, virtual assessments and virtual wards. There has been a lot of good work there. One of our strengthening tools is our testing of care homes — not just residents but staff. The Chair will be aware that yesterday's figures showed that we have 28 care homes with positive, supported patients. Of those 28, 24 were identified through our testing programme, which picked up residents or staff who may have been asymptomatic. Through that testing programme, we have been able to identify those staff members and residents quickly, and get them isolated. That provides an added protection to ensure that we do not see the number or intensity of outbreaks that we saw in the first surge.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister of Health for his statement. He mentioned workforce shortages as a key problem. Will he update the House on the retention of those recruited from retirement etc earlier in the year and on any further plans to address recruitment in the short term?

Mr Swann: Again, the Member hits on the crucial issue. We can open as many beds, wards and facilities as we want, but, if trained staff are not available to facilitate delivery and care, it is pointless. It was a challenge. When this place came back on 11 January, the Member will recall that one of our first achievements was to bring our nurses and healthcare workers off the picket line. At that point, we thought that an additional 300 nursing and midwifery places a year for the next three years was a big achievement. We know now, however, that we already have more than 2,000 nursing vacancies in our healthcare system. There is a lot of work to be done. Much work has been done in investing in the staff that we currently have, but more needs to be done to make sure that we can attract staff from elsewhere and encourage the staff whom we have to stay.

One of my challenges as Minister is to make the HSC an employer of choice. It is a challenge at this time of the year — it is a challenge at any time of the year — and, during the COVID pandemic, it has been particularly challenging. However, as I said, the dedication and commitment that I have seen from our healthcare workforce — nurses, doctors, community pharmacy, porters, healthcare workers, cleaners, canteen workers — is above any commitment that we could possibly ask for. We should be proud of the dedication with which they have delivered; as Minister, I am definitely proud of that.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his steady leadership throughout the pandemic. Everybody in the health and social care service, and everyone else, recognises the confidence that he gives them through his steady guidance. Will the Minister comment on the recommendation from the Royal College of Surgeons about ring-fencing beds? Will he confirm that emergency

surgery will return to Daisy Hill on the resumption of the ED in the coming weeks?

Mr Swann: I welcome the proposal from the Royal College of Surgeons about ring-fencing beds and staff for elective surgery. When I first took up post, long before COVID, one of the challenges was the recruitment of theatre nurses and their specific skills set, because they are needed. That is still a challenge. As I said, I am looking forward to discussing the proposals in more detail when I meet the Royal College of Surgeons again tomorrow. I have had regular engagement with the college. My decisions to implement day cases and orthopaedic surgery centres, and to manage those services on a regional basis, are entirely consistent with the direction of the royal college proposals. As I said, I will ask the regional management board to consider the proposals from the Royal College of Surgeons tomorrow. As I said earlier, during July and August, our trusts exceeded the planned inpatient and day-case procedures set out in their phase 2 rebuild plans. A total of just over 7,500 procedures was planned, and, in fact, almost 10,400 procedures were delivered. That was more than the number planned and more than we had estimated that we could do. That increase is welcome, but it only starts to eat into our waiting lists.

I do not have the detail on the specifics of Daisy Hill in front of me. I am sure that, if the Member refers to the trust's rebuilding plans and surge plans, he will find that included there. If not, I will get the Member an update.

Mr Chambers: My thoughts today are with all the families affected by this dreadful virus. Will the Minister comment on whether there was any engagement with the key stakeholders in advance of today's publication of the framework? Will he give a commitment that the framework, as well as the individual trust surge plans, will be kept under constant review and that all decisions will be heavily informed by the views of clinicians working on the ground?

Mr Swann: I give the Member those reassurances. These are living documents; they are not tablets of stone, given what we have seen over the past few months. We have also seen the ability of our health and social care system to react and change. Many in the House and outside it never thought it possible that it could be so flexible.

I was challenged about the level of engagement in previous documents. Given the speed at which the virus is spreading, it is imperative that we plan now for the surges and the winter pressures. Despite the need to move swiftly, I felt that it was important to engage with key stakeholders on the surge planning strategic framework. I therefore initiated a very short engagement exercise with key stakeholders, which included our trade union colleagues, professional colleges and bodies, the HSC arm's-length body chairs and the voluntary and community sector service users. That was done through our transformation advisory board members.

I thank all the stakeholders for their valuable input, which informed the surge planning strategic framework that was published today and changed some of what had been in our initial framework. In total, 18 responses were received as part of that exercise. In the past, I have given commitments to the House and to the Committee that I would engage. We have engaged, and I am thankful for the productive engagement that those stakeholders had with us in preparing this strategic framework.

Ms Bradshaw: Are you confident that the £600 million allocated to dealing with the additional pressures and needs arising from COVID will be enough to cover this new surge plan? What new treatments are to be introduced now that we know more about how the virus affects the body?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. I caught some of the commitment from the Finance Minister earlier. The £600 million has to be spent in this financial year, so I am content that it covers all the financial asks that we know we can deliver. There is no point in overbidding and not being able to spend in this financial year. Sorry, what was the last part, Paula?

Ms Bradshaw: What new treatments will be introduced through allied health professionals because we now know more about how the virus affects the body?

Mr Swann: There is now a new medical definition of long COVID, which is the after-effects. What we are seeing with this virus is that it is not solely respiratory; it affects the blood circulation system and can even result in mobility issues. So, the more we learn about this virus, the greater the challenge across our entire health and social care system. Our allied health professionals are taking a lead on recuperation to get people back on their feet and build their muscle strength.

We have also identified a need for support from our mental health facilities and practitioners. We know that this virus will have a long-term, detrimental impact on the mental health of anyone who contracts it and on the populace of Northern Ireland. That is why I was extremely keen that we built a section on COVID-19 into our mental health strategic plan. That will lead to a 10-year plan. The mental health challenges that COVID will present in our general population will not be sorted through a short-term plan. It will be a long-term commitment and will require long-term dedication. That is what we are looking to in learning about how this virus affects the general physical and mental well-being of our population.

11.45 am

Mr Givan: The Minister's statement makes reference to the appropriate use of face coverings. Is that an indication that the Minister is concerned that face masks have provided a false sense of security for some people, which has undermined the social-distancing and regular handwashing messages, and that there needs to be an appropriate use if they are to be effective?

Furthermore, the Minister will be aware of what happened in the Republic of Ireland and the breakdown between the Government and the Chief Medical Officer. Observers have commented on the number of occasions when our Chief Medical Officer and our Chief Scientific Adviser have made public recommendations that they want the Executive to implement. What measures is the Minister taking to ensure that we do not have a repeat in the Northern Ireland Executive of what has happened in the Republic of Ireland, which is damaging to everybody involved?

Mr Swann: I will take the Member's second point first. When the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser speak, they do so with the authority of their office and with their scientific and medical experience. However, they are always caveated, and I think that they are always measured and say that any decision is for the

Executive to take. So, they make recommendations — those recommendations are made to me and to all my Executive colleagues — and we have a very good working relationship and understanding as to what needs to be done and what is done in the best interests of Northern Ireland across the piece.

Our Chief Medical Officer and our Chief Scientific Adviser also bring to the table an understanding of the economic and societal impacts of their health recommendations, and they take a balanced and professional approach. Their input is something that we in Northern Ireland should value. I cannot see, at any stage, where we would end up with the divergence that we seem to see between some in the Irish Republic's Government and their medical professionals. That is because we have a truly exceptional team in our Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser and the way that they carry out their professional duties and provide advice and guidance to the Executive as a whole.

The Member asked about the appropriate use of face coverings. Some people have reasons, whether medical or psychological, for not wearing them. However, I would like to see an increased use of face coverings in the appropriate settings, and, indeed, in all settings. We should encourage and regulate more in those areas where we do not see compliance with face coverings where they should be worn. I specifically mean in the retail sector. That is because, as we go into this second wave, we need to do all that we can to support the most vulnerable and those who need that extra bit of protection that we can give, and do that by wearing face coverings in the appropriate settings.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for coming this morning and welcome his comprehensive statement. I commend the significant work that has been done thus far. Going back to the response to COVID-19, the Minister will be aware of the concerns about the relocation of Daisy Hill's emergency department. It is very welcome and positive that it is coming back on 19 October, as a lot of work has been done on it. In my experience as a representative for Newry for almost seven years, we have always had to fight for the retention of services in Daisy Hill Hospital. So, naturally, any move to make changes causes concern in the community, and we work very hard to allay those fears. However, as the Member for Newry and Armagh said, there have been concerns about the future of emergency surgery in Daisy Hill.

I am fresh out of a meeting this morning with the chief executive of the Southern Trust, so I can answer the Member's question: emergency surgeries are returning on 19 October.

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

Ms Kimmins: Yes, I am just getting to it.

Correspondence was issued on 22 September stating that emergency surgeries would not be returning, and that is where the concern has come from. However, this is a short-term plan, so can the Department of Health give assurances that it is committed, in the longer term, to ensuring that the acute surgery service in Daisy Hill will not be downgraded?

Mr Swann: I have given previous commitments. I am glad that you gave that date; I did not have it, and it is a welcome commitment. What we are seeing with regard to the surge planning and the three-month building plans of that commitment is that the emergency surgery has started and will be there in the step phase.

We cannot provide a long-term commitment to any service at this minute in time while and until we get through COVID. One of the things that I have always done as Minister, whether on supplies of PPE or anything else, is not to give a commitment that I cannot stand over. I therefore cannot give the Member that commitment, but I will ensure that we will do all that we can to retain those services, where they are safe to be retained and need to be retained. I hope that the Member takes me at my word: I will not give any commitments that I cannot stand over, and I will not do that to the Member.

No matter where we are now, one of the things that I know is that we do not have a large enough footprint for hospital provision in Northern Ireland to do what we need to do safely, when social distancing and the need for distancing for people who are waiting, getting surgeries and all the rest of it are taken into account. I am using every footprint that I have in my Health and Social Care system. That is why we have used the Whiteabbey facility as the second Nightingale facility. It was already in our ownership and care, so it made sense to redevelop it as our second Nightingale facility.

Mr Robinson: What is the importance of “Hands. Face. Space” in helping to keep health services open as we move through this horrible pandemic? We are now in the second horrific wave of the virus, so could a testing centre be set up somewhere in East Londonderry?

Mr Swann: “Hands. Face. Space” is the message that we have been putting out. Every member of the Health Committee, we in the Department of Health and every healthcare professional has been pushing that message and asking every member of the population in Northern Ireland to maintain and observe good hand hygiene, to wear a face covering — I see that the Member is wearing one — and to give space, which is the social distance that we should maintain at all times: the recommended 2 metres. By following those simple steps, we will prevent the spread of COVID-19. COVID-19 does not spread itself: we spread it. By observing the simple steps of “Hands. Face. Space”, we can prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The Member asked about the establishment of a testing centre in East Londonderry. We have a number of fixed-base testing centres, as well as mobile testing units that we can move around Northern Ireland where we see large-scale incidences of COVID-19 outbreaks. I know that the Member will be aware that one of our districts with the lowest expansion in the number of positive cases in Northern Ireland is the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, which is part of the area that he represents. I would rather that we maintained a low number of COVID outbreaks among the residents of that area by following “Hands. Face. Space” — I think that I got that right — rather than needing to put in a testing facility. The residents of the Member’s constituency are doing what they are meant to do. I encourage them to do more, and, in that way, we will not need a testing facility in East Londonderry.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis ar maidin agus as a chuid freagraí ar maidin chomh maith. I thank the Minister for the statement this morning and his answers so far. Will he commit to supporting Health and Social Care staff, particularly those who may be absent from work while ill with COVID-related illness? Can he ensure that they will get their full wages rather than just statutory sick pay?

Mr Swann: That is something that we have looked at in the past. The Member will be aware that it was one of the steps that we put in place for care home and domiciliary care staff. It was part of the package of support that we gave to providers — even to the independent providers — so that we could ensure that financial pressures did not make anyone in a care home or domiciliary care setting who had contracted COVID go back to work. We provided the ability for them to supplement their statutory sick pay so that there was no financial incentive or need for them to return to work and they could take the 14 days to self-isolate and, if they received a positive test, make sure that they did not spread COVID. That supplementary support measure is still there. It expires at the end of this month, but, as we go into the second phase, it is definitely something that I will seek to continue and ask for financial support to do. It is an important and vital tool in our box to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among a critical but undervalued workforce.

Mr Catney: Will the Minister confirm that our track-and-trace system runs on something a little more robust than Microsoft Excel so as to avoid any mistakes being recorded?

Mr Swann: The Member is slightly confusing two scenarios. He is referring to the number of positive cases across the water that were being recorded through a testing system and then manually transferred onto another system. I did not know that Excel runs out when you get to a certain number of cells. Our test, trace and protect system, which is held in the public health system, is developing a bespoke software package. If I am not correct on this I will get back to the Member, but I was originally led to believe that the initial software package was the same as one used for a hotel booking system because it allowed our test, trace and protect staff to follow through contacts and make use of contacts. It has moved on a wee bit from that. I do not think that our test, trace and protect system relies on Excel spreadsheets, although I am sure that that is a pretty robust system for anybody that needs to use it.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister concluded his statement by urging everyone in the community to go the extra mile with regard to the pandemic. I am sure that I am not the only MLA whose inbox has seen a recent spike in correspondence from what we might call “pandemic deniers”. What is the Minister’s message to those people?

Mr Swann: I have rehearsed my message to those individuals many times. They must think about their message and the damage that it does by undermining the health message that we put out and the one that comes from this place. Every person who hears their message and does not wear a face covering, does not wash their hands and does not practise good respiratory hygiene has the chance of contracting COVID-19, spreading it and putting additional pressures on our health and social care system. Those additional pressures mean more nurses

having to wear additional PPE, more pressure on our ICU beds and more pressure on our doctors and start to challenge the delivery of our health service across the whole system. I ask those who think that it is smart or clever to put out that denial to think of the adverse impacts of their actions on the general public of Northern Ireland, particularly the most vulnerable and those who, like me, are asking everyone who can follow the guidance of good respiratory hygiene, good hand hygiene and social distancing to do so.

Mr Easton: In his statement, the Minister mentioned the StopCOVID NI app and said that over 400,000 people had downloaded it. What more can he do to encourage more people to download the app? It is an essential tool for tackling the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Swann: There is ongoing development of that app, what it contains and the additional information that is contained on it. One of the biggest steps that we have taken recently happened in the last week. Working with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, we were able to facilitate the app being downloaded by under-18s, which opened it up to a completely different tranche of people in Northern Ireland. That is why we went from 380,000 downloads at the end of last week to over 415,000 at the start of this week. We are seeing a new generation downloading it and seeing the advantage that it brings.

It is not a new innovation for the app, but one of its key abilities is that it can work across the border.

We have seen that come to fruition and provide benefit in recent weeks, when we have seen in the region of 1,300 identification keys coming from the Republic into Northern Ireland and 1,200 from Northern Ireland going to Republic of Ireland residents. The interoperability that enables our app to work in both jurisdictions is a key strength that stands us in good stead in Northern Ireland.

12.00 noon

Ms Rogan: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. Will he list the local groups, staff, trade unions and other organisations that his Department consulted when the decision was made to downgrade the A&E department of Downe Hospital in my constituency of South Down?

Mr Swann: That is not something that I have prepared for, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is moving away from the topic.

With regard to the emergency department in the Downe Hospital, I know that a statement was released by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust last night that stated:

“Since the end of July 2020 ... we have had further staffing challenges. Therefore, it is now clear that we are no longer able to fully restore the emergency services provided pre-Covid-19 at this time. However, the Trust recognises the need to improve access to urgent and emergency care services for the local population in the Down area.

From 19 October 2020, as the next phase of rebuilding urgent and emergency care services, a consultant-led Urgent Care Centre will open in the Downe Hospital's Emergency Department. This will operate from 8am-6pm, Monday - Friday on an appointment only basis,

with nurse-led minor injuries services continuing at weekends from 9am to 5pm.”

There will be a contact telephone number. The statement continues:

“Those contacting the service will be triaged and offered an appointment within the urgent care service or directed to the most appropriate service.”

It is not that it is being removed but that the next step is being taken to rebuild it by initiating that consultant-led urgent care centre, which will operate from Monday to Friday.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for his statement and answers. What steps will he take to work with his counterparts in the South to ensure that the COVID surge plan will prevent spread of the virus, particularly in border regions?

Mr Swann: The Member may not be aware, but her party colleague, junior Minister Declan Kearney, and I met at the North/South Ministerial Council in health format on Friday. That was one of the issues that we covered, not only the surge plan but the understanding on both sides of the border of where and how we counter and challenge COVID. That could be through, as I said, the interoperability of our app but also greater understanding, as we see the spread of the virus on both sides of the border, in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area and in Donegal, where we see the same rates of increase and incidence of spread, should that be from community transmission as well.

There has been good working not just between me and my ministerial counterpart in the Republic of Ireland but between our Chief Medical Officers, Chief Scientific Advisers and our public health agencies. There is a good understanding of what we are doing. A memorandum of understanding formalises that engagement on information. There is now a request that our public health agencies work more closely together to identify outbreaks and the causes of the outbreaks that we have seen in border regions.

Mr O'Toole: I am pleased to see that my colleague is back, next to me. Daniel McCrossan will, I am sure, ask a question in a second.

I echo what Emma Rogan said about South Down. People there will be keen to get clarity about whether Downe Hospital moves back to having an emergency department.

Thank you, Minister, for your update. I have two questions. First, it is referred to in the surge plan, but are you completely confident that we have an adequate supply of ventilators inside and outside Nightingale for the months to come? Secondly, can you give clarity on the provision of flu jabs? Are you confident about supply across Northern Ireland for vulnerable people and particularly for HSC staff?

Mr Swann: Since March 2020, the critical care network has procured 180 intensive care ventilators and 24 advanced patient transport ventilators to supplement our existing devices in treating our patients. Of those orders, 124 ventilators have been received, allocated and commissioned for use in HSC trusts. The remaining 80 ventilators are awaited from the supplier and are expected at the end of this month. In addition to that, 145 non-

invasive ventilator devices have been procured for use by respiratory services in the region, as well as 300 high-flow oxygen devices. Each trust has identified local surge plans to meet additional surge demand for COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients, and the regional inventory of 348 invasive ventilator devices, which includes the 80 expected by the end of October, exceeds the current anticipated demand. While equipment will not be a limiting factor in the provision of critical care to patients in Northern Ireland, there is considerable stress on limited staffing resources, and there is no room for complacency.

Last year, 2019-2020, 670,000 flu vaccine doses were administered in Northern Ireland. Over 1 million doses have been procured for this year's programme in order to meet anticipated increased demand for eligible groups and to allow for the vaccination of additional priority groups. The amount procured for Northern Ireland this year is the maximum amount available to order to date, given global demand for the flu vaccines. The target groups — the current groups eligible for free flu vaccination — are everyone aged 65 and over, pregnant women, those aged under 65 in clinical at-risk groups, those in receipt of a carer's allowance or those who are a main carer or the carer of an elderly or disabled person whose welfare may be at risk if the carer falls ill, all children aged two to four, all primary-school pupils and front-line health and social care workers. The delivery of the flu vaccine to our health and social care system has started. A number of peer vaccinators have been trained and are already delivering the flu vaccine across the health and social care system.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Daniel McCrossan, and I wish the Member well. It is good to see him back.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is good to be back. It has been a long few weeks.

As the Minister knows, in the wider community, there is some speculation among those who have difficulty with the testing system. Can he provide assurances to the public and the House on how accurate the tests are?

Mr Swann: I welcome the Member back.

In an earlier question, Mr Nesbitt asked what I could say to those who deny that COVID is real and say that it is a hoax or a myth. I will ask the Member to update us later, in some shape or form, on whether what he went through felt like a hoax, a conspiracy or a myth. Anybody whom I have spoken to who has come through COVID-19, any family that has lost someone due to it or any member of our Health and Social Care staff who has treated somebody with it knows that it is not a hoax.

We use a number of tests. I do not have the details of the specificity or reproducibility of the tests with me, but I can provide them to the Member, because that question has been asked on a number of occasions. Different tests are used in different locations. I will get that to the Member in writing. I wish him well and welcome him back to the House.

Mr Allister: I join in welcoming back Mr McCrossan.

I do not, for a moment, downplay the threat of COVID, nor do I diminish the fact that 584 people have died. However, I am also conscious that, in the first six months of this year, 2,302 people died from cancer, and who knows how many deaths have been hastened by the delays in cancer

treatments? For those last six months, the Department has basically been caught in the headlights of COVID. When we reach a point where the Royal College of Surgeons has to say that we need to ring-fence staff and facilities for necessary surgical procedures etc, does that at all suggest to the Minister that the medical advice that he has been relying on and that has caused the Royal College of Surgeons to have to make that point has been somewhat flawed?

Mr Swann: No, I do not, because the Royal College of Surgeons has been part of the medical advice that we have received. The Royal College of Surgeons has representatives who sit on the rebuilding board as well, and I meet them regularly. The point that it has made about ring-fencing beds and staff is about protecting those staff, beds and facilities from COVID and ensuring that we can continue with the surgery that we have started. The ring-fencing of beds and staff is an ask that the Royal College of Surgeons has been making for a long time.

The Member will know that our health and social care system is already badly bruised and scarred by COVID, but it is picking itself up and, once again, is ready to care for all of us, despite the immense pressures on the staff. When I hear the call from the Royal College of Surgeons, it is not a surprise to me. I have engaged with it, and it has carried forward that message about protection. We looked to the elective day-care centres in Lagan Valley and established the orthopaedic centres so that we could create facilities that are COVID-neutral. They will never be COVID-free — we can never guarantee that — but that is why we are taking those steps.

Regarding my statement, the Member will note the announcement that I will publish the cancer strategy tomorrow, which will deal with haematology and oncology. We know that we have to address those and to get on top of them on a regional basis and that we should no longer deal with them in the way that we were across trusts.

Ms Sugden: The recent rise in the rate of infection should give us all cause for concern, not least so that we do not overwhelm the NHS and prevent care being given to the most vulnerable who are suffering from the effects of COVID-19 or, indeed, any other illness. Minister, I appreciate your attention to accessibility to Health and Social Care services for other illnesses, but there is a lesson that we learned from the first wave — you expressed concern about it — about the limited number of people accessing services that they should be accessing. I am concerned that that will be compounded in a second wave.

I have constituents coming into my office and begging me for appointments and telling me, at a time when they cannot afford to do it because there is a chance that they are at risk of losing their job, that they will pay privately for their child to see a doctor whom they should be able to access on the NHS. How do we genuinely address that? It is not good enough to say that you should call your GP and wait on the phone all day long only to be told, "Go to A&E if it is an emergency". That is the experience that my constituents have.

To follow on from Mr Allister's point, we need to look after those who are suffering the effects of COVID-19 — of course we do — but we also need to look after those who are suffering the effects of other illnesses because those illnesses are ruining people's life just as much as this virus.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her comments. As I said, I listened to the Finance Minister's statement before I came into the House. He spoke of nine years of underinvestment in the health service. I used that line in the House when I took over as Health Minister. We are now reaping the shock of that underinvestment, where we do not have the number of beds, we do not have the number of staff and we do not have the access to the health service that we, as a population in Northern Ireland, deserve. We do not have a health service that our staff working in it deserve, because of that structural, long-term underinvestment. This place has a place in and a responsibility to bring to bear on that.

When we talk about access to other services, it is because we have in the region of, I think, over 2,000 nursing vacancies. We have GP vacancies that we cannot fill. We are looking to invest in that through the medical centre at Magee and the nurse training places that we are bringing forward, but there is no doubt that we do not have the number of people in our health service that we need to make it readily accessible.

I say to the Member's constituents that that is not a service that I want them to experience. I want their GPs to be as open and as accessible to them as possible. I am working with the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association's general practitioners committee. They have issued statements and have encouraged their members to be as open as they can and to access as many patients as they can.

12.15 pm

To counter that, I have also heard the example of a mother who phoned the GP about her child, the GP referred them to a COVID centre because they had COVID symptoms, but the mother did not want to take her child there in case they caught COVID. As we go through the pandemic, education is needed on the different avenues that are being opened up to ensure that people access healthcare provision when and where they need it. There is a large job of work to be done by the Department and the medical professions to ensure that people get access. It is not good enough and needs to be better. It is one of the things that, as Minister, I have tried to do. The pandemic has set us back quite a bit. However, through the support of the House and the Executive, we can get a health service that has been invested in and of which we can and should be proud.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes questions on the Minister's statement. Members may take their ease while we prepare for the next item of business.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Appointment of the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): The First Minister and I are pleased to announce that we have appointed Fiona Ryan as Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse (COSICA). The appointment is for a five-year term. Fiona Ryan will take up the position from 14 December 2020.

COSICA is established under the Historical Institutional Abuse Act 2019. The commissioner's principal aim in exercising functions under the Act is to:

"promote the interests of any person who suffered abuse while a child and while resident in an institution at some time between 1922 and 1995".

Fiona Ryan brings a wealth of experience in working with and understanding the needs of victims and survivors of trauma. She is currently the chief executive of the domestic violence charity Sonas and is also a member of the monitoring committee of the national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in the South.

The appointment of a statutory Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse is a hugely significant day for all those who have been so terribly impacted. Our thoughts are with those who have suffered greatly.

As Members will be aware, the Historical Institutional Abuse Act 2019 was enacted in November 2019. Prompt action was taken to establish the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board, which opened for applications on 31 March. Some seven weeks later, the first compensation payments were made within the timescale that was set out by the president of the redress board. That was a significant milestone for victims and survivors, who are now starting to receive the compensation that is long overdue to them. As of 30 September, 579 applications had been received, 156 of which were from people who participated in the Hart inquiry. Panellists have made determinations totalling £4.144 million and paid out a total of £2.55 million.

We want to acknowledge Brendan McAllister's important work as interim advocate in promoting the interests of victims and survivors, including putting forward the views of victims on improvements to the legislation and advising on procedures for the redress board.

The pain and suffering of victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse can never be erased. This appointment is one further critical step in the implementation of the Hart inquiry recommendations. Important work remains, in the form of an apology and a memorial, as well as important steps such as the implementation of support services for victims and survivors and raising awareness of the redress scheme. We look forward to working with Fiona as she takes up this critical and sensitive role.

Mr Beattie (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the Ministers for their statement on an extremely important issue on

which we have to move forward, and I thank them for the detail in that statement, particularly about where we have progressed those cases in regard to redress. It is important that we know that it is moving forward.

I note that Fiona Ryan will take over on 14 December, yet correspondence with Brendan McAllister said that he is leaving in mid-October. Therefore, will the Ministers address that issue and confirm that the new COSICA will try to re-engage with all the HIA groups, given the disengagement of some?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, Ms Ryan is required to work a period of notice, which is why the appointment will not be until 14 December, but we look forward to her taking up that appointment. It has always been the intention of the interim advocate to continue to provide representation to victims and survivors until we have the new person in post. However, officials will work with the advocate on the level of input required as we work our way through the weeks ahead until Ms Ryan takes up her permanent post. Today certainly represents a new chapter and allows us, as a joint office, to make this very significant appointment. Hopefully, the significance of getting this permanent position in place will not go unnoticed among victims and survivors, and the victims' voices being heard must be at the heart of all of that.

Mr Stalford: Today marks an important milestone. Mr Nesbitt and I might be the only original members of the old OFMDFM Committee who are still on the Executive Office Committee. This has been a long time coming. I remember sitting with some of the victims at the launch of the Hart inquiry. Promises were made, and we have an absolute obligation to see them fulfilled.

This is one part of the package, and it is very welcome. Another part of the package is securing funding for the compensation scheme, and we have very wide estimates of how much that will cost. What update has the deputy First Minister had from the religious organisations that were entrusted with the care of children on the scale of the contribution that they anticipate making to such a compensation scheme?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I concur that this has been a long journey. Elected representatives have worked with and supported the victims, and I commend them on all the work that has been done for many years to get us to this point. The heart of all this is to always remember that these are people who have been hurt and wronged by many institutions. It is really important that everybody plays their part in allowing us to respond to the needs and requests of victims.

The role of the other institutions is crucial, and there have been a number of engagements with the different institutions on the issue of redress. From your Committee experience, you will know that the current estimates for financial redress range from £149 million to a central estimate of £402 million up to an even higher estimate of £668 million at the upper end. We intend to hold a round-table meeting with the institutions to progress this and to make sure that every single redress is made and that we progress all the other issues, including that fulsome apology, the memorial and the other things that were identified. As joint First Ministers, we are determined to make sure that this work is done with speed.

Ms Dillon: First, I welcome today's announcement, and I look forward to meeting Fiona Ryan, when she is in post, to have a conversation with her about how she will engage with victims and survivors. That is a vital element in all of this, and the joint First Minister has already outlined how important that is. It cannot be overemphasised. We know that some groups had difficulties with the interim advocate.

I hope that Fiona Ryan will engage and build a good relationship with victims and survivors.

Will the joint First Minister accept that today's appointment has been a long time coming? Will she join with me in commending the victims and survivors in their campaign for truth, justice and public acknowledgement? Will she also agree with me that the engagement and support that we have talked about with victims and survivors will be vital in terms of the memorial, the acknowledgement and what will be put in place by way of an apology? That will be important, not only to the victims and survivors who are still with us but to the families of the victims and survivors who have passed. It is also important for those who have no interest in compensation but who absolutely want an acknowledgement of what has happened to them or to a loved one who has passed.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. This is a hugely significant milestone in the journey for victims and survivors. It is testimony to their efforts, finding their voice and exposing the horrors of institutional abuse that I am here today as joint head of Government making this announcement.

Everyone in the House will agree that historical institutional abuse should never have happened; it was wrong on so many levels. Trust was breached and children were violated. It is a sad reality that so many children went through this experience and were forced to spend their lives carrying an unimaginable burden for such a long time. We recognise that thousands of children were robbed of their childhood and forced to carry this burden through their lives. It is appalling. They were failed by a system that was supposed to protect them and which even, on many occasions, turned a blind eye to what was happening. It covered up systemic abuse. We need to take this opportunity to learn the hard lessons that need to be learned about what happened in those institutions and make a pledge that it will never happen again.

As the Member said, redress has been far too long coming. We pay tribute to all the victims and survivors of childhood institutional abuse, to their collective will, and to their determination and resilience over many years. It is on days like this that we turn to those who have lost their lives. Our thoughts are with their families. Collectively, across the House, and, indeed, in wider society, we need to support and empower victims to move forward and to assist them in rebuilding their lives.

With the First Minister, I am committed to ensure that all victims and survivors get the acknowledgment, the advocacy and the redress that they deserve. Today's appointment carries forward that work and will begin to progress some of the things that are still outstanding. This is a significant day as Fiona Ryan embarks upon her work, working with victims, being the voice for victims and making sure that they will never be silenced again. We should never forget that, in the midst of all this, it has been

the encouragement, the tenacity and the resilience of the victims and survivors that has brought us to this stage.

Mr O'Toole: Like everyone else, I welcome this appointment. It is overdue, particularly for the thousands of people who had to endure appalling suffering at the hands of various institutions. I ask the deputy First Minister about the staffing support that Fiona Ryan will have. It is right and welcome that this appointment has been made. Other appointments at the TEO, as we know, have not been made. What staffing support will she have in order to be the best possible advocate for victims?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his questions. A lot of work done has been done on the staff available to the interim advocate. We have an obligation to look at the work that is being done, and the incoming commissioner will have an opinion on what the additional needs are. We need to make sure that the commissioner is supported in the best possible way, with the full resources that she requires in order to support victims. If we are marking this as a milestone, as a new beginning and as an opportunity to address outstanding issues, I want to ensure that the commissioner has all the support that she requires. A number of staff who have supported the interim advocate will transfer over to her. I cannot recall the number, but I am happy to provide it to the Member in writing.

12.30 pm

Ms Bradshaw: I welcome today's appointment, although I am disappointed that Survivors and Victims of Institutional Abuse (SAVIA) and, I presume, other victims' groups were not advised of the appointment in advance of the press statement.

Will the new commissioner have any remit to provide support and advocacy to unmarried mothers who suffered abuse in mother-and-baby homes or to children who were abused by clerics in non-institutional settings?

Mrs O'Neill: We thought it appropriate to come to the House to make a statement of this significant nature, and, of course, we will engage with the victims and survivors to make sure that they are fully briefed on its outworking.

To be clear, the role of the commissioner is to be responsible for a number of identified areas, of which the Member will be aware. For example, the commissioner is responsible for appointing a panel of persons, all of whom are victims and survivors, the function of which will be to provide a forum for consultation and discussion with victims and survivors. That panel will be known as the advisory panel.

She will also be responsible for providing advice on matters concerning the interests of victims and survivors and for taking reasonable steps to ensure that victims and survivors are made aware of the functions of the commissioner, her location and the ways in which they can communicate directly with her. She will also undertake or commission research into matters concerning the interests of victims and survivors and encourage the provision and coordination of provision of relevant services to victims and survivors. She will also make arrangements for publicising the role of the redress board; monitor the operation of the redress board; and establish or make arrangements to establish a panel of solicitors, the members of which the commissioner is satisfied have

the necessary expertise to provide legal advice and assistance on applications and appeals.

The Member will also be aware that, for those victims who fell outside the Hart recommendations, an interdepartmental group has been established, under Judith Gillespie, to look at all the people who still need to be supported and a way forward found for them. We look forward to that group coming forward with recommendations on what we can do next. Its work is ongoing. It is a cross-Executive and interdepartmental working group. You will understand that the Department of Health is the lead Department for the work on mother-and-baby homes and the Magdalene laundries, and that is also an ongoing piece of work.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Ministers for their statement. Will the commissioner have the ability to suggest new legislation if, while discharging her duties, she finds that that would be helpful to carrying out the very important duties that will be bestowed on her?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I set out previously the remit of the commissioner. At its core, her remit is to be the voice of victims, to listen to victims, to engage and represent them and to make sure that they have confidence and faith in the Office of the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse to address their needs. When it comes to making legislative changes, or anything else that is required, we will listen. Our door will be open to working with the commissioner. Our door will be open to making whatever necessary arrangements are required, legislative or otherwise. We say this very clearly to victims and survivors today: your voice will always be heard, you will never be silenced again, and this Executive will make sure that we leave no stone unturned in assisting you and the commissioner on the way forward.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. I thank the Minister for the statement this morning. Can she advise why this appointment is not coming into effect until 14 December?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. We were keen for Ms Ryan to take up her post very quickly, but she has current employment and has to work her notice. That is the only reason for the delay. Otherwise, we would have her in place today.

The significance of today should not be lost. This is a significant public appointment that we are delighted to make. We hope that this long-awaited appointment is something that the victims will see as a step forward and a milestone in their journey.

Mr Clarke: Like others, I welcome the fact that we have got to this stage. I am sure that many thought the day would never come when there would be an appointment. We all welcome the fact that Fiona has been appointed to the post. However, given the difficulties around the interim advocate, does the deputy First Minister believe that Fiona is the right person for the job and that she will have the confidence of victims and survivors?

Mrs O'Neill: Today is not about the interim advocate; today is about the new commissioner coming into place. Today is about a new beginning or a new chapter. Today is about giving hope that, finally, things are being done and that the

needs of victims and survivors are being addressed insofar as we have this permanent appointment.

The joint head of Government, Arlene Foster, and I interviewed a panel of candidates. We are very satisfied that the appointment that we made is the right appointment. Clearly, there will be a period in which to build confidence and to gain the confidence of victims and survivors, and work will be done to build those relationships. Ms Ryan certainly demonstrated to us that that is what she is about. She has a wealth of experience working with people who have experienced trauma across a whole range of areas. That is a testament, and it will stand to her in her role as commissioner. We wish her well, and we wish to see the relationship flourish between her and the victims and survivors.

Ms Anderson: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. Like Christopher Stalford, I was in the Assembly when the institutional abuse inquiry was launched. In fact, I had the privilege of being one of the two junior Ministers who launched the inquiry for the late Martin McGuinness and for Peter Robinson, so I welcome today's announcement. As we all know, the victims have been on a long journey. I hope that Fiona Ryan will take to her new post. I am sure that SAVIA, the other north-west survivors' groups and the other victims' groups will all work well together as they go forward. Minister, you said that a number of applicants had already applied. Can you give us some more information on the level of redress payment that has been made to date?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. As I said, the redress board opened for applications on 31 March, and we were delighted that, seven weeks later, the first compensation payments were made within the timescale set out by the president. We know that numerous victims and survivors are now starting to receive their long overdue compensation. The latest figures we have are that, at 30 September, 579 applications had been received, 156 of which were from people who participated in the Hart inquiry. Panels have made determinations totalling £4.1 million and paid out a total of £2.6 million. We are very grateful to the president of the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board for continuing the prompt payment of compensation and the assessment of applications and to the solicitors and groups that are supporting the applicants through that difficult process.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Minister, for today's statement. The appointment is very welcome and long overdue, and I am absolutely delighted that we are at this juncture. We realise that the commissioner's remit is to be the representative voice of victims, but we also know that the families of victims of abuse have suffered greatly as well. Will the commissioner have any remit to support the wider families, not just the victims and survivors?

Mrs O'Neill: The commissioner's job is, obviously, to be the voice of victims, to listen to them very carefully and to communicate to Government and make sure that their interests are taken on board. I have no doubt that that will also include the support circle around victims.

The issue of support services is being looked at, and the interim advocate brought forward a number of recommendations. We need to continue to make sure that all the support services required are in place. I know that the interim advocate looked at what further support could

be provided. Service provision for victims and survivors is needed around, for example, specialist services, in line with the recommendations in the Hart report. The interim advocate put in place, with the Victims and Survivors Service, an interim personal support service that offers a listening ear and access to emotional support and counselling. That can be accessed via the interim advocate's office or independently. In the meantime, officials are looking at how they can expedite preparations to make sure that the commissioner will have a key input into the services that are needed, including those for families.

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the Minister's statement, as it is both very positive and an extremely significant point on this journey. As Mr Stalford reminded us, it was the OFMDFM Committee of the day that scrutinised the legislation that set up the Hart inquiry.

We were all very conscious that it was open only to victims who were abused in an institutional setting and that there were many other victims — perhaps of the same abusers — who did not have access to Hart, not because of the nature of the abuse, but because of the location where it occurred. I hope that the Minister will agree that there is an equality issue here. Further to what she said about Judith Gillespie and the interdepartmental group, can she expand on the terms of reference and the indicative timeline for reporting, please?

Mrs O'Neill: Again, it is important to send a strong message to victims and survivors that no one will be left out, that they will never be silenced and that their voice will be heard in the Assembly and the Executive. I do not have the direct terms of reference for the interdepartmental working group with me, but I am happy to provide them to the Member. Clearly, the role of the interdepartmental working group is to consider evidence relating to all those matters and to make recommendations to the Executive. We look forward to getting the recommendations. I will respond to the Member in writing about the time frame for the interdepartmental working group.

Alongside that is the work in the Department of Health on mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries. No victim and survivor should be left behind. We have an obligation to make sure that we progress all that work in as speedy a manner as possible. We must allow victims and survivors to get to the point where they have the fullness of all the recommendations that were made by Hart for an apology, redress and memorial. I want the Executive to deliver, as a matter of urgency, all the things that are significantly important to victims and survivors.

Ms Dolan: Does the Minister regard the HIA apology as a public acknowledgement of the wrongdoing suffered in institutions?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. The delivery of an apology and public acknowledgement of the harm and wrongdoing will be another significant milestone for victims and survivors. The sooner we can get to that point, the better. We know that a significant body of work has been done through the interim advocate. The interim advocate has worked with the victims and survivors group to look at international best practice.

It is important that, whenever we deliver the apology, it is delivered correctly and appropriately and that it meets the needs of the victims and survivors. I believe that, over the

course of the next short number of weeks, we will have a meeting to discuss the apology. I hope to be able to come to the Assembly to update colleagues on that. The delivery of an apology is a significant and fundamental part of the Hart recommendations, and the Executive are determined to do that.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Ministers for their statement. This is a significant announcement and, as has been said, one that is long overdue. I commend the victims, who have stood strong through very difficult times and have suffered continuously over the years. This will come as welcome news to the victims. I wish Ms Ryan well in the difficult and challenging job that lies ahead.

Minister, given the number of people, is there any intention to increase the office budget, as additional staffing would help? I know you touched on that earlier, but can you give an assurance to those affected that there will be no barrier to the resources necessary to support the commissioner in her vital and necessary work?

Mrs O'Neill: We are determined to support the commissioner in her work, and budgets will be worked out in line with the needs of the office, the needs of victims and what we can do to support them. I thank you for your acknowledgement that this is a day for the victims and survivors; they have brought us to this point. I am glad to be here today as joint head of Government and able to make this announcement, but I recognise that it has been a long time coming.

This is a significant day. I thank all the victims and survivors for everything they have done to get us to this point. They have shown tenacity, courage and resilience for many years in the face of adversity. It is right that we are making this announcement today, and I am glad that we are at this point. However, we have a few more things to do, not least the apology and the memorial. I want to get us to that point, alongside all the other work that needs to happen for the people who do not fall under the terms of the Hart inquiry.

12.45 pm

Mr Allister: I trust that this will prove a more successful appointment than that of the interim commissioner. Arising from the disastrous breakdown between many of the victims and the interim commissioner, what lessons have been learned and what mechanisms are in place to deal with such a situation should it, unfortunately, arise again?

Mrs O'Neill: Let us hope that today is a new beginning and that, when Ms Ryan comes into post as the commissioner, the relationship between her and the victims flourishes. Today is not about yesterday or the interim advocate; it is very much about how we support victims and survivors in the period ahead. That is what I am focused on and that is what I want us to do. We need to have a situation where all victims feel that they have a place and a voice that is directly communicated to us in the Executive. That is what we are determined to do. This is a hugely significant day. Let us assist victims and survivors to look to the future and help them to rebuild. Let us deliver on the commitments that were made in the Hart report, and let us make sure that we are continually looking forward and assisting them in all that they do.

Ms Sugden: I welcome the appointment, and I appreciate that both Ministers have announced it in the House today;

that is an important and significant statement to make. I am also impressed by Ms Ryan's background, not least her experience in the field of domestic abuse. Institutional abuse is comparable with domestic abuse, not least because it is an abuse of trust by the people who should have been protecting those children. The compensation will go some way towards acknowledging the wrongdoings against those individuals, but there is significant trauma there, and, in order for them to heal, we need to put more resources into addressing that trauma for them. Will they be able to access resources such as counselling or legal services through the commission?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in response to an earlier question, the interim advocate has been looking at the support services that are there, at what is missing and at what needs to be replaced. The resource conversation will follow the identification of need. Clearly, that is something that we all want to prioritise. We know that it is a hugely emotive area of work. We want to give a firm commitment today that we will be as responsive as we possibly can be in order to support the needs of victims and survivors as those are identified by the commissioner.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes while we prepare for the next item of business. I remind Members that during this interval it is important to maintain the social-distancing rules and stay 2 metres apart.

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

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. The original intention was that this element of the sitting would go until 1.30 pm, but we are running ahead of ourselves with time. I have been told that, unfortunately, the statement that the junior Minister intends to make runs to 24 pages of text, and we now have fewer than seven minutes to 1.00 pm. It is my intention, by leave of the House, to suspend the sitting. The next item of business will be Question Time with the Minister for Infrastructure. The business from the Executive Office will be dispatched at 3.30 pm, as originally intended. The sitting is suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.53 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Infrastructure

Public Transport: Decarbonisation

1. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on progress made on the decarbonisation of public transport. (AQO 818/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Tackling the climate emergency is the single biggest global challenge that we face. As Infrastructure Minister, I have made addressing climate change one of my key priorities. I am focused on delivering clean public transport and active travel options to build connectivity, reduce emissions and promote health and well-being for all.

Earlier this year, I announced Translink's procurement of three hydrogen buses, which will see the first hydrogen buses and the first hydrogen refuelling station in Ireland. It is anticipated that those vehicles will go into service later this year. In addition, I have committed £55 million capital funding in line with the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA) for the purchase of 100 zero-emission vehicles by Translink over the next two years. The vehicles will include 80 battery electric buses and 20 hydrogen fuel cell buses. It is anticipated that the new buses will go into service in Belfast and Derry in spring 2022.

I assure the Member that I am ambitious and committed to delivering on the decarbonisation of public transport. I recognise that, collectively with my Executive colleagues and Assembly Members, we can deliver lasting change for our communities. However, to make the change that we desire, we need to invest in infrastructure now for the future. I recognise that investment in infrastructure is not an end in itself. It is about people and place. It is about unlocking our economic potential and protecting our valuable environment to transform and connect lives. It is about improving health and well-being for all our communities across the North.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the Minister's answer and her commitment. In the midst of a climate emergency in which transport is one of the biggest contributors to carbon emissions, we need to embrace fully sustainable transport methods. How will the Department's upcoming regional strategic transport network plan help efforts to decarbonise the transport sector? May we also have an update on the £30 million for low-carbon buses that was announced in June?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. In the regional transport plans, we are developing our road and public transport network. For me, that is an important component of decarbonisation. As the Member said, I have invested £30 million this year in low-emission and zero-emission buses. As I said, we have three hydrogen buses — the first in Ireland — to come online before the end of this year, along with the first hydrogen refuelling station. I am also keen to work with Translink so that we

can see decarbonisation across our bus and rail network. I look forward to working with the Member and others to realise that.

Mr Storey: Following a meeting that we had with Wrightbus in my North Antrim constituency, the Minister will be aware of the importance of the issue to that company. Given the importance of hydrogen, what undertakings and information can the Minister give us on discussions that she has had with the UK Government about drawing down our share of the money that was allocated for zero-emission buses? Will she also give a commitment to ensure that the matter goes right across the Executive — it is for not only her Department but the Department for the Economy and other Ministers — so that we get an outcome rather than just proposals and plans?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. As I said in my initial response, we have tangibly and pragmatically moved this forward with the procurement of the three hydrogen buses. As you said, this is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I am in very regular contact with the British Government to remind them of their commitments and the compelling need to honour those.

You are absolutely right about discussions with Executive colleagues: zero carbon is an ambition for the entire Executive.

Just yesterday, I met the Finance, AERA and Economy Ministers to talk about the opportunities that we have across public transport, our waste water infrastructure — right across our public services — to advance that whole agenda, given our ambitious zero-carbon emissions targets and the importance of the pressing climate emergency facing all of us.

Mr Butler: Minister, in your answer to Mr McGuigan question, you mentioned the active travel initiative. You have shown great leadership in that respect. Will you outline any conversations that you have had with councils on planning matters, particularly area planning, and tell us how we, you and your Department can partner with councils to ensure that this is embedded right down to community and societal level?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The active travel agenda is important to me and hugely important for public health and climate action. We really have a wonderful opportunity now. Yes, we have the challenges of COVID and Brexit, but we also have renewed momentum among communities to embrace active travel. We also have the development of the local development plans in councils. Now is an opportune moment to work in partnership with all the councils and local communities. In my Department, my walking and cycling champion is in close contact and engagement with all the councils, which is why we were able to advance the park-and-ride schemes, and we are working closely with them to realise active travel projects across Northern Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, will you provide an update on your Department's work to tackle climate change and tell us how you hope to green our infrastructure, including public transport?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I am committed to doing what I can in my Department, working with Executive colleagues, councils and communities, to tackle the climate emergency. I am struck by the way

in which we as a community in Northern Ireland have rallied together in our response to the COVID crisis, and I think that we will see that impetus. It is important that we encourage everyone to realise the pressing emergency of the climate crisis that faces us.

We are trying to do what we can on public transport. You will know that I have requested a short, sharp external review of the York Street interchange project — an important strategic project to which I am very committed — but I want to ensure that it is inclusive of communities, sits well with all our current strategic plans and plays a key role in tackling the climate emergency. I want to embed that approach across the Department, so that we see things in terms of a green recovery in every aspect, certainly, of the Department for Infrastructure and, I would hope, of the Executive.

Mr Speaker: Members, question 14 has been withdrawn.

Belfast to Dublin High-speed Rail Line and All-island Rail Network

2. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the feasibility study for a high-speed Belfast to Dublin rail line. (AQO 819/17-22)

7. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her plans for an all-island rail network. (AQO 824/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will group questions 2 and 7.

In line with the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach', I have begun early discussions with Minister Ryan on a feasibility study of a potential high-speed rail connection North and South, as we seek to create a spine of connectivity on the island. The intention of a feasibility study will be to provide a high-level analysis of the potential of high- and higher-speed rail to support the wider outcomes and priorities of the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. It will allow for the consideration of options from the electrification of existing lines to bring maximum speed up to approximately 120 mph to the development of a new high-speed connection on the corridor. Work is ongoing, and I intend to engage with my counterpart, Minister Ryan, to discuss the project further at tomorrow's North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) transport sectoral meeting.

On improving the all-Ireland rail network, I am committed to improving transport links for the benefit of our economy and communities across our island. Improving connectivity between the North and South is a key priority for me in providing increased social inclusion, enhanced economic opportunities and an improved environment for all our citizens. I firmly believe that rail is an untapped opportunity, with multiple benefits, that can play a crucial part in our future, and I look forward to making progress with our colleagues in the Irish Government.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answers. I agree with a number of the things that she said. I agree that the need to improve North/South connectivity starts with North/South transport connections, to promote regionally balanced growth and address the effects of partition on the island's infrastructure. However, last week or the week before, Bus Éireann suspended the bus service from Dublin to Belfast

indefinitely. Since the Minister is meeting her counterpart in Dublin, will she raise that issue to try to reverse that decision?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He raises an important point. I was informed by Minister Ryan's office on Saturday 26 September that the Bus Éireann board would be recommending the indefinite suspension of the Belfast-Dublin service. I assure the Member that I am committed to securing island-wide services between Belfast and Dublin and will discuss the matter with Minister Ryan at tomorrow's NSMC transport meeting. My Department will continue to work to provide services for our communities, North and South, and will work with Translink to minimise the impact on passengers.

Mr McNulty: What support is required from across the Executive to deliver on all-island rail that will help to enhance our all-Ireland economy?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. As he knows, I am determined to make progress on island-wide connectivity. In the face of Brexit and economic turbulence, the case for all-island connectivity has never been stronger. Rail is a crucial part of the jigsaw for growing connectivity north to south and enhancing our island economy. I am pleased to say that I have been working closely with Minister Ryan, and we have discussed how we can progress this important area. While we are in regular contact, I am delighted to be meeting him formally tomorrow at the sectoral meeting on transport.

The Member asks a valid question on the required support for all-island rail. Across the globe, we see investment in critical infrastructure as a means to help communities build towards recovery. With the economic strain here, the climate emergency, COVID-19 and Brexit, we need to make strategic choices to enhance our economy and to connect our communities. I will, of course, need funding, but, given our commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' to delivering change and investing in infrastructure, I hope that my Executive colleagues will support the delivery that our communities need.

Miss McIlveen: With regard to developing Northern Ireland's regional connectivity, the European superhighway across the North Channel is central to accessing our largest market but is also the most expensive sea crossing in western Europe. The A77 and the A75, which it connects to, are probably amongst the worst roads in Scotland. What work is the Minister and her Department doing to reduce costs and to secure Scottish or national Government investment in order to address that?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. It is an issue that spans Departments. My officials are working with their counterparts in Scotland, and I am in close contact with Michael Matheson, my ministerial counterpart, because we recognise the strategic importance of that connection. Of course, I will continue to press the British Government to ensure that we get the required investment to allow us to get the road upgrades and the connectivity required to support our economy and to connect our communities.

Mrs Barton: The Minister talked about North/South connectivity: has any thought been given to east-west connectivity and, perhaps, an investigation of rail transport towards Dungannon and on to Enniskillen?

Ms Mallon: I am very mindful of east-west connectivity. As I have said on the Floor of the Assembly, one of the positives of COVID-19 and something from which I have benefited is the close engagement that has taken place with ministerial counterparts across these islands. I have developed a positive working relationship with Michael Matheson in Scotland, my counterpart in Wales and Grant Shapps in the Department for Transport, although, at times, it is fractious. I do not want to lose that engagement; I want to build on it. It is particularly important in the face of Brexit.

I am very ambitious for our rail opportunities. The difficulty that I will face is my ambition being curtailed by a lack of investment and funding. Public transport, like all organisations, has suffered hugely as a result of COVID-19, with a dramatic drop in passenger numbers and, therefore, income. The battle for me is to secure the necessary investment to protect our existing public transport network. However, I assure the Member that my ambitions do not stop there. I want to see rail connectivity pushed across Northern Ireland. I want to see public transport as a cornerstone of the Executive's economic and climate action strategy.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: Miss McIlveen raised my issue. I am content.

2.15 pm

Car Cruises: Portrush and Portstewart

3. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions she has had with the PSNI in relation to car cruises in Portrush and Portstewart. (AQO 820/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with all partners to reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries on our roads. As such, I have regular discussions with the PSNI about road safety, and I am acutely aware of the ongoing road safety concerns relating to car cruises in Portrush and Portstewart.

I recognise that local residents are extremely concerned about the adverse effects caused by vehicles speeding and from noise pollution in the area. My officials have had discussions with both the PSNI and Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council about those events, and I understand that a further multi-agency meeting is to be arranged.

Members may also be interested to know that the Department is progressing legislation to extend existing traffic-calming measures on Lansdowne Road in Portrush. That will introduce some additional traffic-calming humps to address some of the concerns about speeding in Portrush.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) provided technical support during a multi-agency enforcement operation in Portrush and Portstewart on 30 August 2020, which coincided with a recent car cruise event. During the operation, police escorted 14 modified cars to Coleraine vehicle test centre, where each vehicle was thoroughly examined by an enforcement officer using the agency's vehicle test equipment. Results from those inspections revealed that 12 vehicles — 85% — were found to be non-compliant with construction and use requirements to

varying degrees and that four were found to be in such dangerous condition that they could not continue to be used on a public road. Overall, 12 vehicles were subject to immediate prohibition action owing to varying road safety critical defects, with several drivers informed that they would be reported, with a view to prosecution by police.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for her response. I have had those detailed conversations with the local PSNI and am aware of the figures. Is she prepared to work with a multi-agency task force perhaps to look at ways in which to close off the promenade during those peak times, with Saturdays and Sundays being the worst?

Ms Mallon: I know that the Member has been working very hard on the issue locally. The police can and do close roads in Portstewart and Portrush when they have concerns about public safety. We need to be clear, however, that that is not really the solution, as we want all drivers to use the road and to have respect for all. I can assure him that my officials have attended the multi-agency meetings to date and will engage with all the partner organisations to try to address that issue and local residents' concerns.

Dr Archibald: Similar to Mr Bradley, I am in regular contact with the PSNI about those events annually. The Minister touched on how she is addressing issues to do with congestion and speeding. Is she also looking into the air pollution that comes with those issues?

Ms Mallon: I very much am. I see the problem as having multiple layers, and we need to take a comprehensive approach to it. Tackling the issue of modifications to exhausts and the dangerous condition that a number of the vehicles are in will help with that. Doing what we can to ensure that drivers are not gathering in large numbers and revving their engines is also an important component, and we will continue to work with all elected representatives, including the council, with the PSNI and with local communities to try to get the situation under control.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the fact that the Minister has been very helpful by agreeing to ensure that traffic-calming measures will be progressed. I am grateful that she recognises the stress that some boy-racer enthusiasts have caused my constituents. Will she provide an update on the traffic-calming measures that will assist in stopping cruising and speeding?

Ms Mallon: As I have outlined, my Department is progressing legislation to extend existing traffic-calming measures on Lansdowne Road in Portrush. The scheme will consist of the following measures: one set of speed cushions on Causeway View between the junctions of Lansdowne Crescent and Princess Street; and two sets of speed cushions on Lower Lansdowne Road. The proposal was advertised earlier this year, and there were no objections. I recognise how concerning this situation is for residents, and I am pleased that the scheme is planned to be in place this financial year.

Ms Sugden: I thank my constituency colleague, Mr Bradley, for raising this issue in the House. It is an issue that all MLAs have been contacted about. I appreciate the Minister saying that it is not just an Infrastructure issue, but that it is a multi-agency issue. In fact, it is an interdepartmental issue, because this ultimately gave rise to quite serious antisocial behaviour, which culminated in quite a serious and significant event that led to the

promenade being closed. I have a concern that we may face this again at other times of the year. Will the Minister work with the Minister of Justice to look at this as an antisocial behaviour issue, and to see what measures she can add to that to mitigate this happening again?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I place on record my appreciation to local representatives of all parties who have been representing their constituents concerning this issue. They have also been very much in solution mode as well, so they are representing their constituents' concerns while coming up with practical ideas about how we can work together to address this. My officials have attended the multi-agency meeting — I know that the PSNI was there, but I do not know whether there were any representatives from the Department of Justice. However, a partnership approach is the right approach in this instance, and my officials will work across all Departments and with all statutory agencies to try to address this and to bring peace of mind and a better quality of life to the residents who are affected.

A2 Buncrana Road: Update

4. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the progress of the A2 Buncrana Road scheme. (AQO 821/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In June, I announced my commitment to fund the continued development of a number of strategic road improvement schemes, including the A2 Buncrana Road, as part of my plan to aid economic recovery and community transformation while addressing regional imbalance. As is consistent with my wider priorities, I am committed to ensuring that this scheme is future-proofed and that it will help to stimulate the green recovery. My Department will continue to progress the A2 Buncrana Road scheme in line with my objectives, which include improving transport links, road safety and traffic progression, and contributing to the regeneration of the area while maintaining the environment and achieving value for money.

Earlier this year, I met local business owners in the area, and I have committed to exploring what options can be looked at in the light of their concerns. I am keen to work in partnership with the community to deliver positive change for the north-west. I hope to be in a position to decide upon the progression to the next stage, which includes the publication of the draft statutory orders for consultation, by mid-2021.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her response. I recently met local businesses, and they put across the position that there is potential for 300 jobs to be lost if the development plan is not adjusted. Unfortunately, they have been met with the rejection of those proposals by some of the officials. Will the Minister intervene to ensure that those 300 jobs are protected and that the concerns of those businesses are upheld?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As I have said, I met local businesses on the Buncrana Road earlier this year to directly hear their views and concerns. I have asked my officials to continue discussions with all the stakeholders over the coming months, while progressing the scheme's development. That is, in particular, to ensure that it meets my objectives,

but also so that we work to try to address the concerns that are being expressed locally.

Ms Anderson: Minister, you will know that I have spoken to you about this matter at the Committee, I have written to you on it, I have raised questions and, like Gary Middleton, I have also met some of the retailers. I will ask you the question again, because they are not convinced that Roads Service is really taking them seriously enough in that they need modifications to the original plan. We all support the A2 Buncrana Road; it is vitally important for the city to unlock its potential. So, Minister, I think that is important that you send them a signal that you are listening — I know that you are listening to them — and that the modification of the road will definitely be taken into account in the context of New Decade, New Approach and co-design. Nothing about us without us.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. As I said, I specifically wanted to meet the local business owners earlier this year to hear directly, in a face-to-face meeting, the concerns that they have. I have said very clearly to my officials that they need to be engaging and working with local stakeholders. I have said all along, since I took up this post, that we need to work in partnership: local people know what works best. Obviously, I have strategic priorities in my Department, and there are a number of measures that we need to meet to ensure value for money, but we get to the right place and get better outcomes when we all work together. So, I can assure you that I will continue to listen, and I have asked my officials to continue to engage directly so that we can work forward together.

Ms Hunter: Martina raised my issue, so I am content.

Mr Speaker: OK, thank you.

Translink: Financial Support

5. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what financial support will be required by Translink during the remainder of 2020-21 if current service provision is retained and passenger numbers remain suppressed. (AQO 822/17-22)

Ms Mallon: First, I stress that securing the financial future of our public transport network remains a priority for me as we respond to the pandemic and develop sustainable ways of connecting people and communities to opportunities.

My Department's estimate of the financial support that is required by Translink for the remainder of the current financial year is £20 million, and it will continue to bid for the shortfall. That sum takes into account the planned efficiencies identified by Translink in response to COVID-19 as well as the most up-to-date picture of customer demand. We must also recognise that reduced passenger numbers do not automatically mean a similar reduction in the level of costs for the company.

Translink continues to play a vital role in ensuring that our citizens can continue to access their jobs, education and essential services, and I want to be clear that that funding is necessary if we want Translink to continue to provide that service. Protecting a publicly owned public transport network, safeguarding jobs and ensuring that there is a network that is accessible for all and based on need, not solely on profit, remains my priority, and it is one that I know all my Executive colleagues share, given the

renewed commitment that I recently secured to ensure that the network is protected and funded.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her response. I declare an interest, as I was previously an employee of Translink. Significant funds have been allocated across the water to train-operating companies, bus operators and Transport for London. That money came across to Northern Ireland as Barnett consequentials. Does the Minister not agree that the failure to pass that support on to Translink will have a devastating impact on local communities and our efforts to tackle climate change?

Ms Mallon: In short, I fully agree with the comments and analysis from the Member. On my desk, I have a very high pile of correspondence from all political parties, asking for additional services, additional train halts and an extension of rail lines. I wish that I was in a position to be able to grant them all. As I said, Translink is facing a hugely difficult situation as a result of COVID, and, as the Member rightly said, we have seen, right across these islands, that Governments have recognised that and recognised the importance of public transport to connecting people and tackling the climate emergency. There is also a social justice element because so many people cannot afford cars and are wholly reliant on our public transport network. So, I will continue to make the case at the Executive and very much look forward to the continued support of the Member in that regard.

Mr Boylan: Is the transport network meeting the general demand of the public? I ask that in the context of rural areas, because there could be a reduction in services in those areas.

Ms Mallon: From the onset of COVID, I agreed to a reduction in services. However, throughout the COVID crisis, we have constantly reviewed passenger demand and ensured that we have services on standby to enable social distancing across the network. If the Member has concerns about a particular rural service, I am happy to take them away and look at them. We have been increasing our services across Northern Ireland in line with our risk assessment, the public health advice and the regulations from the Executive. The Member will also know that Translink has put on an additional 500 buses to make sure that we can transport our schoolchildren safely to and from school.

Mr Speaker: I call Paul Frew; there are seconds left.

Mr Frew: Thank you. Was it not a monumental error, and therefore a matter of regret to the Minister, to not put in place the apparatus to furlough Translink staff? Has the Department calculated how much the furlough scheme could have saved Translink?

Ms Mallon: In short, Translink did furlough staff. Translink also provided a very detailed analysis of the scoping potential for furloughing, which was shared with and accepted by the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues.

I know that the issue causes great hurt to Translink staff. As one person said to me, "Every Thursday, people stood clapping for front-line workers". Translink was at the forefront of the fight against COVID, making sure that essential workers were getting to and from work, going over and beyond. They find it deeply hurtful that, throughout that, people were calling for them to

be furloughed when it was clear that the furloughing apparatus did not apply in that instance.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We move on to topical questions.

2.30 pm

Connectivity Review: Priorities

T1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her likely priorities when she engages with the Prime Minister's new connectivity review, which is to be led by Sir Peter Hendy. (AQT 481/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I look forward to engaging with Boris Johnson on the connectivity review because there has been no consultation, certainly not with me as the Infrastructure Minister in our devolved region.

I am clear about the connectivity review. Connectivity is hugely important, but the British Government signed up to a number of commitments within 'New Decade, New Approach' that they have yet to honour. At a recent meeting with Minister Walker, I offered to send again that list of commitments to ensure that the British Government honour them. There are key strategic infrastructure projects right across Northern Ireland that would really transform lives. That is where we should put our investment, not into a £20 billion vanity bridge between Northern Ireland and Scotland that none of us wants.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can the Minister tell us what, according to her road engineers, the top-three pinch points in the Northern Ireland roads network are and her intentions for easing those pressures?

Ms Mallon: Within the Programme for Government and 'New Decade, New Approach' are strategic infrastructure projects that we all signed up to: the A5, A6 and A1. We have also had significant and systematic underinvestment in our water and waste water infrastructure. In Northern Ireland, we now have more than 100 locations where we are at or just beyond development capacity. If we believe in building homes for families and in growing our economy, we must invest in our water and waste water infrastructure. That is imperative.

Driving Tests: Backlog

T2. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that before the online booking system went live yesterday, there was at least a seven-week waiting list for a practical driving test and that, this morning, over 730 people were queuing for over 20 minutes even to get on to the website to book a test, when the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) will deal with the backlog in driving tests and provide a service that meets the needs of the community. (AQT 482/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He raises an important issue.

There has been high demand for driving test bookings since the service reopened to all customers after being shut down for several months due to the Executive's regulations to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Thousands of driving tests have been booked for October to December. Those include bookings for priority groups,

those who had tests cancelled, and the new tests. The queueing software has worked well and has prevented the system from crashing, which we saw happen in England. Slots have been released across all test centres up to the end of December. Today, the DVA released further slots from January. The DVA will be incrementally releasing additional slots for November and December when staffing availability is confirmed, as it continues to recruit more examiners to increase testing capacity as quickly as possible.

Mr Chambers: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. There is a large number of experienced driving instructors in the private and public sectors, many of whom can train and test to an even more advanced driving level. I am sure that you fully appreciate the disruption that delays are causing to individuals and the economy. Will you consider bringing in urgent temporary measures to enable additional testing at once?

Ms Mallon: Yes. I want to assure the Member that the DVA has been taking steps in that regard. It has already recruited three additional examiners. We are in the process of recruiting 12 temporary vehicle examiners and an additional 12 permanent vehicle examiners. The purpose of that is to free up our dual-role examiners to carry out additional driving tests.

I understand the disruption that this is causing, but I also have to be honest with people. This is a high-demand service that was shut for five to six months. We have put in measures around the call system, and we put in the queueing system. We compare, at this moment in time anyway, although it is a fast-changing situation, favourably with other parts of these islands. In the Republic of Ireland, for example, there is an eight-month waiting list for a practical driving test. These are very difficult times, but I assure you that the DVA is doing what it can to resume its services safely and as quickly as possible.

Driving Tests: Backlog

T3. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what lessons have been learned in relation to driving tests over the past number of days, given that she said previously that lessons would be learned from events in GB. (AQT 483/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As I said, in England the system crashed when it went online because of the volume of calls. In anticipating and trying to learn from that, my officials have been very closely engaged with the DVLA in England. We procured a queueing system to ensure that it would be able to cope. I am pleased to say that that is happening. As I said, we have been in a very significant recruitment process to bring in additional examiners. We are also exploring how we can provide tests in the evenings and on Sundays, but I have to caveat that with the need to ensure that the road safety conditions are paramount, because this is about teaching people to drive safely on all our roads.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Minister for her answer, but the truth is that a few additional slots are not going to sort out the problem. There is a backlog of around 23,000 cases. People wait for hours to get to the front of the queue only to be told that all the slots are gone. Will the Minister tell us why the system went online prior to the published date? Why were some people able to get test dates through their

instructor in advance of the system opening? It all seems a bit 'Animal Farm'.

Ms Mallon: I do not accept the figure of 23,000 cases. I have heard it cited a number of times, and I am keen to see the evidential basis for it. As I said, it is a high-demand service. When you close a service for five to six months, there will be difficulties. Trying to get a restaurant booked is difficult, and trying to get an appointment at a dentist or a GP is difficult.

The official reopening of online booking services for driving tests was scheduled for 8.00 am on 5 October. That was the time that the link to the driving test booking service was activated on the nidirect front page. However, Capita completed its testing of the system at around 8.00 pm and removed the restrictions on the system that had been put in place for key workers and those who had tests cancelled due to lockdown. We now know that a number of customers managed to access the system from this point, although, inadvertently, that eased some of the pressure on the service the following morning.

MOT Validity Certificates

T4. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action she is taking to remind motorists of their obligation, particularly for insurance purposes, to maintain their vehicle in a roadworthy condition, given that although MOT validity certificates for cars that are more than four years old were extended for 12 months, it appears that there was no written communication with car owners to confirm that. (AQT 484/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At the beginning of the process, temporary exemption certificates (TECs) were posted in hard copy, but, given their volume and the need to try to have a smooth and efficient process, we moved to an automated system. I know that that has proven difficult for some people. I think that it was Paula Bradley of the DUP who raised it as a particular issue for older citizens, so we have been engaging with Age NI and other sector groups in order to help with the communication about the automated system.

There is a DVLA website labelled "Check the MOT status of a vehicle". Anyone can go on that to see the MOT and TEC status of their vehicle. I encourage Members to encourage their constituents to do so. The Member makes a very important point. Responsibility for the safety of a vehicle rests with the owner at all times. I ask Members to help me in trying continually to convey that message to the public.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her answer. The solution to all this would be to bring the backlog of MOT tests up to date. Has the Minister considered extending the opening hours of MOT centres, perhaps to include Sunday opening? Has she even considered licensing private garages to conduct MOT-type tests, as they do across the water?

Ms Mallon: The use of private garages is not possible under our legislation. I confirm that 14 test centres are up and running. The centre in Belfast, which is about to become operational, was handed back as a COVID testing centre, and the lifts are being installed as we speak. I hope that, within the next week, that centre will be live. That will

help with the additional capacity that the Member seeks for his constituents.

Comber Greenway: Investment

T5. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to invest in and upgrade the Comber greenway from the Holywood Arches to the Billy Neill playing fields, albeit that he welcomes her decision to invest £2.8 million in greenways and recognises that the Comber greenway encounters problems at the boundary between Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and Ards and North Down Borough Council. (AQT 485/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is a champion for the Comber greenway in his constituency, and I welcome his support for the development of greenways more generally. I remember the Adjournment debate that the Member secured in March, and it was in light of that and of wider considerations of the benefits of greenways that I have found myself in the position where I am trying to support them. We wrote to all the councils to ask them for proposals in order to invest the capital moneys that we have in this financial year. I am very much in the hands of councils.

I know that the Member has a particular interest around lighting of the Comber greenway, and I have asked my officials to look into that. That will necessitate bat-friendly lighting and neighbourhood consultation. It is key to work in partnership with the councils, which have a much wider remit than me on this matter. I assure the Member that I am keen to do what I can to support the Comber greenway and the advancement of greenways across the North.

Mr Newton: That is, indeed, encouraging. I remind the Minister that Belfast City Council and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council voted unanimously in favour of the development of that stretch of the Comber greenway. Will the Minister indicate when she might invest in that stretch?

Ms Mallon: I have made an allocation this year. I hope to be in a position to provide further support to other greenways in the next financial year. We have asked councils that were not in a position for us to be able to invest capital moneys this year to provide us with their proposals so that we can advance and progress through to delivery next year. Of course, that will be subject to funding, but I hope to be able to advance this agenda while I am the Minister for Infrastructure.

Driving Tests

T6. **Ms Rogan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that a lot of people depend on driving for essential journeys, including getting to work, and deserve to have proper access to important services such as driving tests, why our services were not better prepared to recommence. (AQT 486/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Driving tests have recommenced. They commenced for priority groups several weeks ago. The system went live this week for new driving tests, because we had worked through key priority workers and those who had had their tests cancelled, which, I think, was the right and fair approach. As I said in response to a number of questions from Members, this is a high-demand service that was shut for five to six months. However, as I hope

that I have demonstrated, in procuring the queuing system for the online service, by the fact that we are recruiting 27 vehicle examiners and by exploring additional capacity through evening and weekend testing, we recognise that this is a really important issue, that we are doing what we can to minimise disruption while making sure that we adhere to all the risk assessments that we have carried out, that we adhere to the public health advice and, of course, that we adhere to the Executive's regulations.

Ms Rogan: My question has been answered, and I have no further questions.

“Boris Bridge”

T7. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will approach the proposal for a “Boris bridge” with an open mind and realise the true potential that such a bridge could bring to the economy in Northern Ireland, particularly because, although, in May 1994, the Euro tunnel was officially opened, connecting mainland France with mainland United Kingdom, a feat of engineering and a game changer for trade and connectivity, she this week sadly branded a studied plan for a potential “Boris bridge” a publicity stunt. (AQT 487/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. If there were an endless pot of money and if we had strategic investment in our strategic infrastructure network, I would be happy to look at this. The reality is that this bridge is estimated to cost £20 billion, and there are huge questions over its engineering possibilities. We have to look at the person who is proposing it. He has a long list of vanity bridges that he has never been able to get off the ground. So, yes, I am open to all key strategic projects, but I remind the British Government and the Prime Minister that he has given commitments around New Decade, New Approach and that he absolutely must honour those.

Mr Speaker: You may ask a supplementary question in the final seconds, Mr Buckley.

Mr Buckley: There were sceptics in 1994 for the Euro bridge. I have no doubt that they are here today in the Chamber, but there are people who want to see a feasibility study for such a bridge and the recognition of the potential of that for the economy. I ask the Minister to engage proactively with the community and the transport sector on how this project could go forward.

2.45 pm

Ms Mallon: I recognise that the project has support among a number of people and do not want to be disrespectful of that, but imagine what we could do with £20 billion. The Member is proactive in representing his constituents and seeking advancements to and progress on infrastructure in his constituency that I support and would like to do more on. We look at what we could do on the road network. We have spoken about the need to decarbonise public transport. Those are priorities. I would not like to be in a position where we were squandering — yes, I said, “squandering” — £20 billion on a bridge that neither the Scottish Minister nor I as Infrastructure Minister see as a number-one priority.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. Members may take their ease for a moment or two while we prepare the Chamber.

Justice

Vulnerable Prisoners: Care Review

1. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the review of care of vulnerable people in prison. (AQO 833/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The care of vulnerable people is paramount and is taken very seriously across the justice system. It is particularly important in the context of the work of the Northern Ireland Prison Service as we seek to care for and support a significant number of people with complex and challenging health needs who find themselves in custody.

In answering a similar question in February 2020, I indicated that the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) had been asked to undertake the review and would report by September 2020. Unfortunately, as a result of the pressures caused by the developing pandemic, it was not possible for the review to be completed. My Department and the Department of Health continue to work with the RQIA to complete the review, with delivery of the final report now expected in May 2021. Although I regret that the announced review of vulnerable people in custody has not taken place, by working closely with the South Eastern Trust — our healthcare provider — the Prison Service has made significant progress in improving support for people who are at risk.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for her answer. As the Minister said, she indicated at the beginning of the year that her intention was to discuss the care of vulnerable people in prison. Can she now commit to taking that important work forward as a priority with her counterpart, the Minister of Health?

Mrs Long: I can, indeed, commit to its being a priority. It would have happened by September but for the fact that COVID meant that the RQIA, as the Member will understand, was repurposed and refocused to assist with the health crisis. We are working with the RQIA to ensure that the review takes place.

We have, however, delivered a lot in the interim. We have a joint suicide and self-harm risk management strategy and a joint management of substance misuse in custody strategy. We are reviewing our Supporting Prisoners at Risk (SPAR) procedures. That has resulted in the delivery of a new person-centred approach that aims to support someone through a period of crisis or distress as well as addressing the root causes. We now have well-being hubs in each of the prisons that provide therapeutic environments for people in care who need the trust's mental health teams. We also have specific therapeutic spaces in each of the establishments to provide multidisciplinary support to people at risk. Therefore, it is a priority. We are making progress, but I still want to see the review done by the RQIA as quickly as possible.

Mr Beattie: A death in custody is unusual; two deaths in 10 days is extremely rare. Our thoughts are with the families of those who have died. Does the Minister think that it was acceptable that the Assembly and Justice Committee found out about the second death via social media and whistle-blowers, especially in light of the fact that I had raised the issue of chronic understaffing of night custody officers?

Mrs Long: I want to unpick some of the issues in the question. First, every death in custody is not just unusual; it is a tragedy. A family is grieving as a result of that death in custody, and it is our practice in the Northern Ireland Prison Service to liaise carefully with families on public announcements. In the case of the second death, it was at the request of the family that no public announcement was made, and that was respected. However, in both cases, the deaths, as you would expect, were reported immediately to the Prisoner Ombudsman, the coroner and the PSNI, and a full investigation will happen of each of those deaths in custody. It is crucial that people do not make pre-emptive or prejudging statements on a death in custody when the nature of that death has not yet been investigated or established.

With respect to the specific and unrelated issue of staffing in the prison, I assure the Member that the governor and the senior management team scrutinise staffing figures daily, including night-staff deployment, and redeploy staff where necessary. That process ensures that adequate numbers are on duty at all times, and I can confirm that there were adequate numbers — the full complement — in all residential areas of the prisons on the nights when those tragic incidents took place.

Sexual Offences Convictions: Legislative Error

2. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Justice what measures will be put in place to support the 17 victims of sexual offences recently informed by the Public Prosecution Service that their assailants' convictions are to be set aside as a result of a legislative error. (AQO 834/17-22)

10. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Justice, following the Public Prosecution Service announcement that the convictions of 15 individuals for certain sexual offences are to be set aside as a result of a legislative error, what actions have been taken to ensure that a similar case does not arise in the future. (AQO 842/17-22)

Mrs Long: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 2 and 10 together.

First, I want to say again how much I regret that this incident happened and apologise to the victims of these offences for any additional trauma that they have suffered as a consequence. I realise how difficult it must be to accept that the convictions of those who committed these crimes against them will be rescinded and how difficult it is to hear these issues being discussed in the public domain. My priority throughout has been to ensure that the victims are protected as much as possible from further distress, and, once I was made aware of how the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) intended to proceed, I sought assurance from the director that support would be in place when victims were informed about the intention to set aside the convictions and would continue for as long as is necessary, once victims had had time to absorb and consider the information. The director provided that assurance and advised that he had engaged the services of Victim Support and Nexus, and I am grateful to both for their assistance during this period.

My officials have had regular meetings with colleagues in the PPS in 2020 to understand what went wrong. Further meetings will take place in the coming months to take stock and consider what actions are necessary to ensure

that the lessons learned from the current situation are applied going forward. As part of that approach, I have tasked a senior lawyer in the Department to develop a quality-assurance check mechanism that will be built into processes involved in developing policy and drafting provisions for future legislation. I have also spoken with the Director of Public Prosecutions, and we have agreed that a joint system review will be formed between the PPS and DOJ to take forward work in that regard.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her answer and for coming to the House last week. Some further questions arose out of that. You gave us quite a good update last week, but do you have an update on how many of the cases will involve reprosecutions and how many will not, if you have those figures, particularly relating to those who are on the sex offenders register?

Mrs Long: You will appreciate that reprosecution is not a matter for my Department; it is a matter for the PPS. It is too early, at this stage, to judge whether there will be reprosecutions in all or some of the cases. The PPS is liaising with the victims to take on board their views, and it will look at the evidence and what impact it has on the protection of public safety. That is one of the core issues that the PPS will have to consider as it reaches its decisions. However, as I explained last week, there are certain protections in place with respect to public safety, so the fact that the convictions have been overturned does not mean that they will not turn up, for example, on Access NI checks. It will simply, first of all, be put through the filter of the senior police officer responsible for responding to those checks.

Mr Chambers: Minister, have your officials actually met any of the victims? Has the Minister met them, or does she have any plans to do so in the future?

Mrs Long: My officials have not met the victims. They have been contacted by the Director of Public Prosecutions and his team, and that is appropriate, as it was their decision to prosecute the cases. If any victims wish to speak to me, I am, of course, willing to meet them, as I am all victims. However, I would certainly not wish to impose on them any further trauma or debate around the issues, if, perhaps, some of them simply have now acknowledged that the error happened and do not wish to discuss it further. We have to proceed sensitively on the issues, but, if a victim wishes to meet me or my officials, I am more than happy to do so.

Ms McLaughlin: What measures has the Minister put in place to ensure that no perverse compensations are made available to those convicted under the legislative error?

Mrs Long: We noted last week that it would be my intention that, if anyone were to seek compensation for their conviction, the Department would resist robustly. These are not flawed convictions; these are robust convictions. Many of them — I think at least half of them — are the result of guilty pleas. There is no question here about the validity of the convictions. This is simply about the court in which the case was taken forward. We would not be willing to consider lightly any claim for compensation, and we would resist it.

Individuals may be entitled to reclaim other payments that they may have made. We have said that we will indemnify the victims of those crimes against having to repay any compensation. They are relatively small amounts

of money, but, nevertheless, the indignity would be significant, were we to expect any victims to repay, given that none of this is their fault. We will indemnify any victim where there is an attempt to reclaim that money. However, there is no clarity that that would be the case in any of the cases at this stage.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her very clear statement last week on the issue. In that statement, the Minister said that it was some three months between her Department knowing about the issue and her knowing. Will the Minister clear up for the House whether she had any inkling or received any sort of briefing before she was informed, or was she kept completely in the dark for three months?

Mrs Long: Last week, I set out clearly the timeline of when I was informed, when the Department was informed and of what it was informed. I have nothing to add to that statement today. It is important for Members to understand that there may on occasion be issues that arise in the Department where someone thinks that there may be a problem or is concerned that there is a problem. It is important that we allow people to do that investigatory work so that, when they come to the Minister, they come with the full picture, and I think that that is what officials were seeking to do.

What I want to have in the Department and in the justice system more widely is a system in which people feel free to come forward and raise issues if they have concerns and in which they can raise issues with the Minister if they are concerned that there may have been errors or faults. What we want from all of this is to have a justice system that is responsive and is properly held to account. Creating that culture of accountability is hugely important, but it involves allowing staff to do their job without constantly feeling that someone is breathing down their neck.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Minister accept that there is now a duty on her to take action to preserve any documentation or evidence that was used during the original convictions, should reprosecutions have to occur?

Mrs Long: One of the key documents that will be preserved is the court record from the original trials, where people will have pleaded guilty or where evidence will have been presented. There may not be a huge amount of other evidence available. Some of the cases date back to 1973. We have to be realistic about what will and will not be available. There has been no suggestion, however, from the DPP that a lack of evidence would be an issue in deciding whether to reprosecute the cases.

Mr Speaker: I call Stewart Dickson.

Mr Dickson: For question number 13 or for a supplementary?

Mr Speaker: A supplementary.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Minister, you had a meeting with the PPS about the situation. What assurances have you received that that error or errors like it will not reoccur?

Mrs Long: There are two things that we need to do out of this. The first is to put the victims in the situation first and ensure that every resource that they need is available in order for them to cope with what has happened. The second is to look robustly at the system.

3.00 pm

This was a unique error that we have not seen happen anywhere else in the system. However, that is not to say that it is not possible that there are other errors, because this is a human error and these things happen. The important issue is how we respond to it. Part of that response is that we will work with the Director of Public Prosecutions to review all of those changes in legislation and make sure that, where saving provisions are necessary, those are in place and learn, going forward, so that this is not repeated. In fairness to the Chamber, its presence and scrutinising role is possibly the best safeguard against what happened in that particular case in 2008. At that time, we were not here and able to do that work as an Assembly in terms of justice. Committees' role in looking carefully clause by clause at legislation, asking questions and scrutinising how things are taken forward is absolutely critical to avoid a repeat.

Prison Service: COVID-19 Recovery Plan Prisons: COVID-19

3. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Northern Ireland Prison Service COVID-19 recovery plan. (AQO 835/17-22)

14. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the changes made in prisons as a result of COVID-19. (AQO 846/17-22)

Mrs Long: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 3 and 14 together.

Ensuring the safe operation of custodial environments is a top priority for my Department. The Northern Ireland Prison Service has followed the advice of the Public Health Agency and worked closely with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust to implement an extensive range of precautionary measures in March this year. Those measures included the suspension of in-person visits, forms of temporary release, significantly restricting access to prison establishments and the introduction of house-based routines to support social distancing.

Further to those specific measures, there are robust arrangements in place for the isolation of individuals committed to custody or who become symptomatic. The Northern Ireland Prison Service also has well-developed and embedded procedures for prisoners and staff to be tested for COVID-19. Prisons also have extensive arrangements for the supply and appropriate use of PPE and for handwashing. All of this work has been supported by regular communication about the risks of infection and how they can be mitigated. Advice about handwashing — catch it, kill it, bin it — and social distancing is widely displayed and reinforced at establishment level and service-wide.

On 3 July, the Prison Service formally initiated its operational recovery plan. Through that plan, the measures introduced will be incrementally and gradually relaxed, provided that the risk posed by the virus does not alter and impact on those plans.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, what preparations are you taking around sickness absence within Prison Service staff and the potential longer-term complications arising from those recovering from COVID-19?

Mrs Long: Absence was a consideration at the height of the pandemic in the spring and may well become a consideration again. We took a number of measures at that time, including additional payments and additional hours worked, but we have to be realistic in how we manage our resource, so we will be responsive to any changes in attendance at work. A number of our prison officers fall into the vulnerable category and we need to recognise that, in addition to a significant cohort of people within the prison system who are also vulnerable.

A lot of work is being done to ensure that we have the proper staff complement. There have been recent recruitments to Prison Service and we continue to work forward with that as new people are brought into the service. We hope that that will help alleviate some of those concerns.

Mr Clarke: Minister, in your response, you referred to some of the restrictions on visits and such like because of COVID. With regard to visits and protestors outside, has the Prison Service done enough to bring that to an end, as opposed to putting additional burden on the service?

Mrs Long: First and foremost, the policing of protests outside the prison is not a matter for the Prison Service, it is a matter for the PSNI. Prison Service worked, at all times, with the police with regard to the protest. If the Member is referring to the protest within the prison, I believe that the Prison Service acted proportionately, as it has done throughout the COVID crisis, in ensuring that those who return to prison from outside, whether from a hospital — in this case it was Craigavon Area Hospital, where there had been a spike in COVID — or from the general public, go through a period of isolation to ensure that we keep the prison population safe and free from COVID-19. Given what has happened in other residential environments, and, indeed, other prisons across these islands, it is to the credit of the Prison Service that we have only had one case detected in prison, and that was in the isolation unit that was doing the job for which it was designed.

Serious Crime Act 2007: Section 44

4. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice whether the use of section 44 of the Serious Crime Act 2007 is only intended for serious crime. (AQO 836/17-22)

Mrs Long: While the short title of the Act is the Serious Crime Act 2007, its provisions are not limited to dealing with serious crime offences, though that is the purpose. That is the case particularly in Part 2 of the Act, which introduced offences of encouraging and assisting crime. Section 44 falls under Part 2 of the Act. Section 44 of the Serious Crime Act 2007 created the offence of intentionally encouraging or assisting an offence. It sets out what a person must do to commit the offence and provides a further definition of what is meant by "intention". Its application is across the spectrum of criminal offences and is not intended only for serious crime.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers so far. She may have anticipated what my next question is about. As she said, the purpose of the Act, as the name suggests, is to deal with serious and organised crime offences. While I know that she cannot talk about any particular case, let me just say that, for background, the PSNI used the Act on five occasions in response to the Black Lives Matter protests

on 6 June in Derry and Belfast, and that caused a lot of consternation. I may have said this already, but if I did not, I obviously have to say that I am member of the Policing Board. Minister, based on the answer that you have given and the example I have used, do you believe that it is either proportionate or appropriate to use serious crime legislation for peaceful protests or anything like that?

Mrs Long: The issue is about not only whether a protest is peaceful but whether it is lawful, and that was the point in question. Given the ongoing investigations by the ombudsman and by the Policing Board, and given that those cases are, potentially, still before the courts, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specific use of the offence. I am aware of the comments of the Director of Public Prosecutions in the press today about the use of the offence. It would be best for all of us to wait on the outcome of the investigations in order to judge that. I can speak only to the legislation, and whilst the legislation is the Serious Crime Act, the sections of the Act that were used are not solely for use in dealing with serious crime; they can be applied across a range of other offences.

Mr Givan: We know that the Minister has been tasked with looking at enhancing enforcement powers around the COVID regulations. Will she refer to that section as part of her consideration of the issues?

Mrs Long: To correct the record, I volunteered to look at the issue of serious offences because, like all my Executive colleagues, I want to play an active role in ensuring that we are able to deal with the issue in a timely way. We will not necessarily be referring to that offence, but it does point to an issue, and that is about differentiating between those who, in good faith, embark on activities believing them to be organised by someone in a way that complies with the regulations and those who organise activities and fail to comply with the regulations. The burden ought to lie more on those who organise events inappropriately and without having due regard, than on those who, perhaps, attend in the false confidence that they are attending an event that is safe and secure. We want to look at the penalties not just for individual infractions but for those who organise events or manage facilities and do not have due regard to the regulations.

Prisons: Segregation Costs

5. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the costs of a segregated prison system. (AQO 837/17-22)

Mrs Long: It is important to understand that the management of separation in our prisons is complex, challenging and, at times, dangerous. Therefore, I want to begin by paying tribute to the staff of the Northern Ireland Prison Service for the commitment and courage that they demonstrate every day working on our behalf.

If a prisoner, whether sentenced or on remand, applies for and subsequently meets the criteria for separation set by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Prison Service is required to hold that individual in accommodation apart from the other prisoners at that establishment. We currently have 42 adult male prisoners in Maghaberry — 19 loyalists and 23 dissident republicans — accommodated on four landings in Bush and Roe houses. Three dissident republican female prisoners are held on one landing in Fern House at Hydebank Wood.

It costs the Prison Service in excess of £2 million per annum to operate separation at Maghaberry. We expect annual running costs at Hydebank to be in the region of £330,000. Irrespective of whether we agree with the concept of separation, it is vital that the landings are appropriately staffed and security is commensurate with the level of risk that the Prison Service is required to manage.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for that answer. A fortnight ago, she told me in the Chamber that she would support an end to segregation but that the matter lies with the Northern Ireland Office. I will quote her:

“It is not my duty to direct the Secretary of State.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 30, p314, col 1].

Does she understand that nobody was asking her to direct the Secretary of State but just questioning why, if she is in favour of an end to segregation, she has not had the conversation with the Secretary of State?

Mrs Long: First and foremost, with all due respect to the Member, he is not aware of what conversations I have or have not had with anyone. He did not ask that question, and I did not answer it.

The separated regime exists because conditions in wider society create a need for that regime. Bringing about an end to the separated regime depends on our collective success at tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime. The Executive have an action plan that they are implementing and have committed to extending the programme of work that we are using to build resilience in individuals and communities. It is vital that we also provide the political leadership to enable that change to happen.

The Prison Service has a range of commitments under that action plan, and those are important in their own right, but it cannot address the wider and underlying conditions that will depend on the success of the overall action plan. The focus and priority in our prisons has been on keeping people safe throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. That is what we have done, and I pay tribute to the staff for their work on that. There is a commitment to reviewing the operation of separation under the tackling paramilitarism programme. That will be taken forward when possible, but the focus for now is on managing the risks to prisons from COVID-19.

Mr Dickson: Minister, I am sure that you agree, as would every right-thinking person, that the sooner we end segregation and bring about the circumstances to end it, the better. That can be done only through tackling paramilitarism and other criminal activities like that in our communities. However, there are other issues that we need to deal with in order to deal with segregation in our community. We have segregation in education, housing, teacher training and other things. Some of those might be easier asks, but it is important that we all work together to end segregation in our prisons.

Mrs Long: Our prisons are a microcosm of the society in which we live. If we want to tackle separation in the prison system, we need to tackle segregation outside the prison system. All of us have a role to play in that, not just me as the Minister. However, if leadership is required in these areas, I will not be found wanting. That is why I have set up

the political advisory group for the tackling paramilitarism programme. We have had our first meeting. We intend to meet again. We will be driving this forward, hopefully, with collective political engagement, but it has to be a collective response. I have to put first the safety and security of those in the prison; not just those in the separated regime, but the rest of the prisoners as well.

Ms Dolan: Can the Minister outline her plans for wider and more comprehensive reform of the overall prison system?

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware that Prisons 2020 has just about reached its expiry date. While a huge amount of good work has been achieved under that, we are now in the process of looking at the next phase of improvement. We are constantly trying to improve support for prisoners and accommodation in prisons and to make investment in our prison system, particularly on the rehabilitation issues, that will allow people to rejoin society and play a constructive and productive role when they exit prison. I believe that that should be the focus of what we look at in our prisons, because being successful in rehabilitating prisoners is the best way to prevent further victims of crime.

Mr Allister: Minister, none of us needs to be reminded of how tight finances are, particularly during COVID. Am I to understand from a written answer that you gave me that £482,000 was spent on preparing landing 4 in Fern House for three women republican prisoners and that the annual ongoing resource cost will be £355,000? Have we really got things into the proportion that they should be in, in these times?

3.15 pm

Mrs Long: Like the Member, I am very concerned about the cost of separation in the prison system. The previous separated unit at Hydebank is now a mother-and-baby unit, and the interim accommodation that was being used was not considered suitable from a security perspective. Consequently, landing 4 in Fern House was identified as a discrete and more secure facility. Extensive work was required, at a cost of approximately £482,000, to repurpose the unit, and the work had to be completed within a two-week period. Structural, electrical and mechanical work were all required to enhance security, and it is right that we ensure that an adequate and appropriate level of security is in place to manage the challenges that are presented by separation and by particular prisoners.

Unlike Maghaberry, Hydebank is not a category A prison, but the risks that are presented by those who do not recognise the legitimacy of their imprisonment are no less significant at Hydebank than they are at Maghaberry, and it is right that we should invest in that.

However, I reassure Members that, despite all that expenditure, less than £6,000 was spent on cell furniture, soft furnishings and a recreation room. It is right that the Prison Service should provide modern, decent and fit-for-purpose accommodation. I visited the unit in order to ensure that that is what we have done. This is not, in any shape or form, about luxury or preferential treatment; it is about decency and security and managing a very difficult environment professionally, competently and humanely.

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

Policing Board: Ministerial Power of Removal

T1. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Justice, in the light of the fact that, under the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, she has the power to remove a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, whether there is anything in that Act that compels her to await the outcome of internal action by the Policing Board before she can consider or exercise those powers of removal, particularly because, under its standing orders, the Policing Board is dealing with a complaint against Mr Gerry Kelly MLA, one of its board members, either by informal resolution by the vice chair or, if that cannot be achieved, by referral to the chair. (AQT 491/17-22)

Mrs Long: I have to put my position on that issue on record. I found Mr Kelly's comments to be offensive and inappropriate, and I ask that he reaffirm his commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means, consistent with his responsibilities as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board and as a Member of the House.

Any investigation into whether Mr Kelly is in breach of the Policing Board's code of conduct is a matter for the board in the first instance. I am aware of the powers that are available to me under the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 to remove members of the Policing Board, and, should the matter come before me, I will give it careful consideration. However, as Minister of Justice, I have to stand for due process, and it would be wrong for me to make decisions precipitately before the due process has been followed.

Mr Chambers: With respect, is it not the case that, in fact, you have moved outside due process by calling on Mr Kelly to reaffirm his commitment to peaceful means? The Policing Board's code of conduct appears to be silent on the actions that the board can take. Public confidence in the board has been seriously undermined. Will the Minister consider dealing with the situation as a matter of urgency?

Mrs Long: No, I do not believe that I have gone outside due process. Every single one of us in the House has a duty to call on all Members to respect the rule of law, to be temperate in their exchanges and to be sensitive to victims. I do not believe that that in any way precludes any decisions that will be made by the Policing Board. I await the outcome of the board's deliberations on the matter, and, when they are brought to me, they will get the due consideration and regard that they deserve.

COVID Regulations: Penalties

T2. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the appropriateness and effectiveness of penalties for breaches of COVID regulations. (AQT 492/17-22)

Mrs Long: Penalties are currently under review. Quite frankly, it is hard to judge whether the distribution of penalties is what drives people's behaviour or whether it is people's genuine concern for their family, their friends and their community. I rather believe that it is the latter. At the beginning of the COVID crisis, we saw people acting in extraordinary ways, making huge sacrifices to protect their family, community and loved ones. By using the four Es — engaging, educating, encouraging and enforcing — we are helping people to continue to comply with the regulations.

As with any law, there must be some enforcement, which must be fit for purpose. The review that I am undertaking with Executive colleagues this week will look very carefully at that issue and make recommendations to the Executive in due course.

Miss McIlveen: I appreciate the Minister's response. Given the extent and scale of some of the breaches to date and the lead role that the junior Ministers are playing on the ministerial-led group on compliance and enforcement, will the Minister outline the extent of her personal commitment, and that of her officials, to the work of that group?

Mrs Long: My senior officials sit on the group and contribute to the discussions. I raise these issues on my biweekly calls with the Chief Constable to ensure that there is good policing input. I have to remind Members constantly that it is not only the police who are responsible for enforcement but councils have a role. I offered to take forward the review of the penalties as a separate piece of work. I will bring the recommendations to the Executive in due course, hopefully in advance of this Thursday's Executive meeting. It is important that all members of the Executive are committed to that.

It should be noted that the police, councils and others are looking at a different model of how they take forward these issues under civil contingencies legislation, which would probably transfer responsibility for leadership on the issue to Health as it wishes to be tasked, from a Health perspective, with the duties that it undertakes as they do not sit comfortably in the Justice sphere.

Face Coverings: Fines

T3. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the imposition of fines in relation to people not wearing face coverings and to state whether the regulations concerning masks have been sufficiently enforced. (AQT 493/17-22)

Mrs Long: There is a danger in thinking that, because there have been no fines on an issue, there has been no activity around it. That is a flawed narrative. The police make many thousands of interventions with people in an average week; they speak to people, ask them to wear a mask, explain the importance of it and explain the regulations. The vast majority of people who are able to do so comply. The fact that we are not handing out fines is not that unusual; there has not been a significant number of fines across GB, either. It is quite a difficult area for the police to enforce. There are sensitivities in terms of people's underlying health conditions that may make it difficult for them to wear masks. There can be complications in determining the age of an individual and whether they should be wearing a mask in different circumstances. It is incumbent on all of us to show leadership. By showing leadership, we show that we recognise the importance of wearing a face covering when we are in closed circumstances and where we may find social distancing being breached. By showing people that we do not see the wearing of face coverings as in some way emasculating or as a pointless exercise, we can demonstrate leadership in the community and, hopefully, encourage others to take their responsibilities in that regard equally as seriously.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for that response. There have been disturbing reports about unacceptable abuse towards workers, particularly shopworkers, who have played a vital role throughout the pandemic. Will the Minister give assurances that such unacceptable abuse will not be tolerated by her Department and the criminal justice system?

Mrs Long: I think that we have all witnessed people being less than gracious when they have been asked to put on a mask in a shop, a restaurant or wherever they may be by the people who have gone out every day throughout the pandemic and served the community in order to keep things ticking over. Anyone who gets abusive towards staff risks exactly the same penalty as they would at any other time. Engagement has to be civil. If people have good reason not to wear a mask, there is nothing to preclude them from making that clear without getting into altercations with shopworkers. We have been clear that, although the police do not have the resources to be in every shop or on every bus, train or street corner, they have the resources to respond when people are being abusive, are creating a disturbance or being intimidating or threatening towards members of the public. I hope that shopworkers have the confidence to phone the police in those circumstances. I am sure that they would get a speedy response.

Antisocial Behaviour

T4. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the membership of the antisocial behaviour delivery group that is led by her Department. (AQT 494/17-22)

Mrs Long: The cross-departmental, multi-agency group brings together officials from local government, the Department for Communities, my Department and, I think, the Executive Office. I will write to the Member with the full detail of its membership and complement. The group's work is hugely important in tackling antisocial behaviour (ASB). We clearly have issues around how we tackle that. Those issues have been multiplied by COVID but they pre-exist it. We have been working on that in respect of an antisocial behaviour strategy and how we might implement better procedures.

Ms Bailey: Will the Minister let us know how many times the group has met to date and whether the strategy will be published so that we can see it in the form of a report?

Mrs Long: As regards an update on the review, there will be an opportunity for people to see an outcome. In the review of ASB legislation, we are engaging with stakeholders, including colleagues across other Departments, to gather evidence and discuss what changes, if any, should be made to the legislation. However, non-legislative measures and any structures to allow for partnership and collaborative working are also being considered. It is a Programme for Government commitment to review ASB legislation. I have to say that the momentum for that has been heavily influenced by disorder in the Holylands linked to on-street drinking.

In April 2018, the DOJ undertook a public consultation. Since the publication of the response document in December 2019, we have been taking this forward in respect of how we will gather and share evidence. The first meeting of the delivery group to progress the work was held in July, the second meeting in August, and plans

are in place for monthly meetings. Any legislative change spanning a number of Departments is unlikely to be commenced within this mandate. However, as I said, there is an opportunity for us to take this work through via non-legislative measures. An update on the work will be with the Justice Committee in the new year.

Sentencing Review NI: Update

T5. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Justice, given that, last week, her Department published a summary of the responses to the sentencing review consultation, to outline her next steps and to advise when she thinks this can be turned into an action plan. (AQT 495/17-22)

Mrs Long: First, I want to thank, and put on record my appreciation of, everyone who responded to that consultation. We often hear sentencing, sentencing structures and so on being debated. It is hugely important that, when people get the opportunity to give us their feedback, they do so.

For me, when reviewing the consultation document, the number of responses around road traffic deaths was stark. I think that that was largely as a result of the incredible campaign by Enda Dolan's parents to focus attention on that element of the consultation. However, we had some very thought-provoking responses throughout the consultation. There will be an opportunity for us to take that forward. I am considering those responses. We will then move on to see whether changes need to be made to the sentencing framework or whether, in the interim, non-legislative measures can be taken forward to ensure that people feel that the time and energy that they invested in the consultation is repaid in the out-turn.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that a number of issues were not included in the consultation, such as sentencing in respect of drugs and car theft, does the Minister believe that the consultation went far enough to address the lack of public confidence in sentencing policy?

Mrs Long: I will say a couple of things in response to that. First, the sentencing review did not indicate a lack of confidence in sentencing policy. There is sometimes a lack of understanding of sentencing policy. That needs to be addressed by Members as much as by anyone else so that, when they communicate sentencing, they understand the detail of the sentences and how they are arrived at.

I have been on a steep learning curve with respect to sentencing over the last eight months.

3.30 pm

It will be hugely important to look not only at the issues covered in the sentencing review but at other issues that may be raised as we take it forward and when it comes to, for example, legislation. Others may want to feed into that, including Members, and they will have ample opportunity to do so through the Justice Committee or, indeed, through me directly.

PSNI: 101 Reporting System

T6. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice whether she agrees that the PSNI's 101 reporting system needs an urgent overall. (AQT 496/17-22)

Mrs Long: The operation of the 101 system is an operational matter for the Chief Constable and the Policing Board to take forward. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on it.

Mr M Bradley: The reason that I ask is that I receive regular complaints from constituents, who feel like criminals when they try to report incidents, especially incidents of a sensitive nature. They also feel that some of the operators who answer the calls hang up because they do not know what geographical area the complainant is speaking about. It is an urgent matter that needs to be addressed.

Mrs Long: If the Member wants to write to me, I would be more than happy to pass that concern on to the Chief Constable for him to look at it in due course.

Mr Speaker: I can let Catherine Kelly ask a very short question.

Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill

T7. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice to give a timeline for the completion of the passage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, given that the Justice Committee is due to conclude Committee Stage in the next fortnight. (AQT 497/17-22)

Mrs Long: First, I want to thank the Justice Committee again. The Bill is a weighty piece of legislation, and some significant improvements have been made to it through the Committee system. That is why scrutiny is so important.

I will meet the Chair and the Deputy Chair of the Committee shortly, not just to look at the scheduling of Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage of that Bill but to discuss other legislation that we hope to introduce to the Assembly over the autumn. It is also, of course, a matter for the House, through the Speaker, to schedule business. Perhaps, having heard your plea for us to do it quickly, Mr Speaker will be minded to accommodate that.

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, time is up, so we cannot explore that matter any further at the moment. [Laughter.]

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When I asked the Justice Minister about the conversations that she had had with the Secretary of State, she said that I did not know what conversations she had had because I had not asked that question. The Hansard report of 22 September makes it clear:

"I ask again, what steps is the Minister taking to address this issue?" — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 30, p314, col 1].

I did ask the question. Having a conversation is taking a step.

Mr Speaker: OK. The Member has made his point. I will review the Hansard report in due course.

Mrs Long: Further to that point of order, I am happy to clarify that now if it would be helpful.

Mr Speaker: Very briefly, please.

Mrs Long: I do not believe that having a conversation is taking action. I believe that having a conversation and exploring the issues is not a step towards action; it is

simply that: a conversation. I was not asked whether I had had any conversations.

Mr Speaker: OK. Your remarks have been noted. Thank you very much.

Members should take their ease while we prepare the Chamber.

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

Executive Committee Business

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the motion on the statutory rule (SR), I want to say two things. First, on a personal note, I thank all the Members of the House who contacted me during my recent illness. It was very much appreciated. I also want to record in Hansard my appreciation for the Member for South Antrim for ordering me to the hospital to ensure that I got the necessary medical treatment.

Secondly, the statutory rule that we are about to consider relates to the opening of soft-play areas. If you want to talk about Funky Monkeys in Dundonald, that is fine. If you want to talk about Coco's in Newcastle, that is grand. If you want to have a general discussion about coronavirus and how the Government are handling it, not so good. I ask Members please to direct their comments to the content of the statutory rule.

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

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

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

Mr Kearney: May I just note your opening remarks, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle? They offer very timely and appropriate guidance on the progress of the debate.

The motion before the Assembly relates to the amendment (No. 3) regulations to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations. Members will recall that the (No. 2) regulations were made on 23 July. They revoked and replaced the original health protection regulations, including all the previous amendments made to them. The (No. 2) regulations required the closure of certain businesses, services and premises listed in the schedule, except for limited permitted uses.

Prior to the motion before us today, the (No. 2) regulations were subject to a number of amendment regulations, some of which have already been laid in the Assembly by the Health Minister. The first amendments to the (No. 2) regulations were made on 7 August. Those allowed certain venues to reopen under specified circumstances, including theatres or concert halls for rehearsals or live recordings without an audience. Nightclubs, conference halls, conference facilities and soft-play areas remained subject to closure, however.

The amendment (No. 3) regulations, which are the specific and singular focus of today's debate, removed soft-play areas from those businesses, service providers and premises subject to closure and allowed them to reopen on 14 September. The decision to exempt soft-play areas from closure was agreed on the basis of the most up-to-date medical and scientific evidence at the time and

on the stipulation that all relevant public health guidance and mitigating measures be implemented in advance of reopening.

The Executive considered the reopening of soft-play areas to provide the balance in retaining livelihoods in the sector, whilst improving family life. It is hoped that restoring a sense of normality for children, as well as providing them with a controlled space in which to develop their social skills, will help to increase their well-being. That amendment followed the reopening of other key spaces for children, which was catered for in the original revisions to the regulations in July 2020. Those included summer schemes and playgrounds. The decision to reopen soft-play areas came into effect over three weeks ago, and much has changed since then.

Ní mór dúinn ár machnamh a dhéanamh ar an rún atá os ár gcomhair i dtaca leis na cúrsaí reatha is déanaí. Caihfimid an comhthéacs reatha a chur san áireamh i gcónaí. It is therefore important to consider the motion in the context of recent developments. As has been repeatedly emphasised in these debates, we need to take account of context at all times, and levels of community transmission, continuous scientific analysis and due regard for societal and economic recovery are all relevant to the context in which decisions need to be understood and agreed. Over the past week, in the context of stable testing, there has been a marked increase in new positive cases, along with a progressive rise in COVID-19 hospital patients, which are now close to 25% of peak levels during wave 1. The R number is clearly above 1 for new cases and hospital admissions, and has been for a number of weeks.

The First Minister made a statement to the Assembly last Tuesday. Since then, there has been a further increase in the daily number of people testing positive. Yesterday, the number was 616, and today that number is 669. Unfortunately, there has also been further deaths, bringing the death toll to 585. Yesterday, there were 64 COVID patients in hospitals across the North. Today, there are 85, with 13 in intensive care. The current number of confirmed cases in the South of Ireland is 38,549. Throughout Ireland, a total of 53,908 confirmed cases have been recorded. To date, 2,395 deaths have been caused by the virus throughout the island.

From the outset, the behaviour and pathway of the pandemic has been similar across Ireland. However, levels of community transmission and confirmed cases of infection in the North have remained as a factor of that island-wide pattern. That, however, has now changed. Tá athrú ollmhór ann anois, agus tá cúrsaí ag dul in olcas ó thuaidh. Notwithstanding the deteriorating situation in the South, it is deeply alarming to note that, per head of population, the levels of community transmission and infection in this jurisdiction now exceed what is happening there. Our power-sharing Executive have discussed that new, disturbing context. It is recognised by every Minister that we have entered a new and dangerous phase of this health emergency. All Ministers from our five main parties are agreed that this changing situation requires us to reset our regional Government's approach to tackling COVID-19 in the coming period.

Evidence from the test, trace and protect programme tells us that a significant number of COVID cases are being acquired through household contacts and informal interactions within the community. In response to that,

further restrictions have been imposed on gatherings in domestic settings — initially on a postcode basis, and then extended to all households. They were brought into effect through amendment No. 4 to the No. 2 regulations. Restrictions imposed on indoor venues were then extended to outdoor venues through amendment No. 6 on 28 September.

Members will also be aware of the restricted opening hours for hospitality venues. A closing time of 11.00 pm has been applied to the hospitality sector with effect from last Thursday. Those measures were brought into effect through amendment No. 7 to the regulations on 1 October and will be debated by the Assembly shortly. Most recently, additional restrictions have been placed on those who live and work in the Derry City and Strabane council area. None of those decisions has been taken lightly, and they have been based on the latest scientific evidence and advice, but the escalating situation in Donegal and the Derry City and Strabane council area gives us all great cause for concern.

While attending the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) sectoral meeting on health last Friday, I emphasised the need to ensure that all the required capacities in testing, PPE, ICU and bed capacity were available in this subregion of the island. It reinforces the need for increased North/South coordination and, indeed, a two-island approach.

Measann an Feidhmeannas go bhfuil na srianta sin riachtanach agus in ord agus in eagar. Ní mór dúinn feidhmiú le tras-seoladh na paidéime seo a shárú. The Executive consider those measures to be necessary and proportionate. We must act now to curb the transmission of the virus. I assure Members that those measures will be in place for only as long as it is considered necessary.

Once it is safe, the restrictions will be eased in line with advice from our Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and our Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA).

3.45 pm

All of this shows that the landscape today is quite different from when the amendment on soft-play areas was made. For example, on 10 September, when the Executive made the decision, 599 individuals had tested positive in the previous seven days. Yesterday, that figure was 3,630, which is an increase of over 500%. Therefore, in recognition of the challenges for soft-play areas, the Executive published guidance on 28 September. That guidance informed the owners and operators of the ongoing legal restrictions and requirements. It also offered advice for businesses, including the steps that they can take to reopen and operate in a manner that minimises the risk of transmission. We encourage all soft-play areas to consider that guidance and advice carefully and to be particularly vigilant at this time.

This is a challenging time for us all. All Executive Ministers from our five main parties are agreed on the need for increased unity of purpose and integrated modes of working. The danger of this new unfolding context should not be underestimated. We will have to rely on new levels of community and political resilience in the time ahead. That will place new demands on all levels of government. As political representatives from all parties, we will each need to be focused on what actually matters regarding our

fight back against COVID-19 in the Assembly Chamber, in our scrutiny Committees, at Executive meetings and in separate working structures with our partner agencies. In the coming weeks and months, we will all have to play our role in a whole-of-government and whole-of-society effort to help to suppress the virus. We have demonstrated before that we can do it. Ní neart go cur le chéile. I am confident that we will do so again.

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

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. In the light of your opening remarks that Members would be restricted in their comments, and, now, in the light of the fact that eight of the 10 minutes of the junior Minister's speech would have been, on any construction, in breach of that ruling, can you now revisit it and advise the House that we will all have the same latitude in context in regard to these regulations?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mr Beattie (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): There has been much debate about amendments to the COVID-19 regulations and the impact that the easing of restrictions has on the R rate, and, more recently, we have seen the introduction of tougher restrictions in an effort to bring the R rate down and maximise public health. The Committee has discussed issues around the lifting of restrictions but does not have the responsibility for scrutinising the legislation. The statutory responsibility for that lies with the Health Committee, and I am sure that the Chair will provide detailed commentary in due course. In summary, the Committee for the Executive Office welcomes the lifting of restrictions when the time is right but encourages, in the strongest terms, compliance with those restrictions that remain in place to help in the fight against the spread of the virus.

I will now make a few comments as an Ulster Unionist Party MLA. COVID-19 remains unpredictable. I am giving this statement, here and now, instead of the Chair of the Committee because of COVID and because he is self-isolating. That just shows you that it is in every walk of life, and I wish Colin all the very best. However, there are some in our society who are simply not taking it seriously. Like the proverbial drunk driver, they will do nothing until there is a fatality, and when there is a fatality, it is far too late.

We talk about easing restrictions, as we are now, in soft-play areas. It is important to ease some of those restrictions. Soft-play areas are not just places for children to socialise with other children; such play aids physical and mental development and their well-being as they mature. Soft-play areas, such as Peter Pan's Neverland in Portadown, are among the most comprehensive and safe ways for kids to develop, so it is right that we look to see how we can open up places like soft-play areas. However, at the same time, we have to impose restrictions in areas such as the Derry and Strabane council area. It is not complicated. We just need to understand what is happening in the COVID environment that we live in. I have said this before: we can unpick the regulations, every day of the week, by picking a scenario and developing that scenario so that it will unpick the regulations, but that will not help anybody. The reality is that, if we do not start to

adhere to the legislation and guidance in 2020, we will still be talking about it in 2021, and nobody wants to see that.

Enforcement is a tool, but, increasingly, we will have to look at using enforcement as a tool to make sure that people adhere to the guidance and legislation. I see that some Ministers have stepped up to the mark, put their names forward and forced through those unpopular enforcement measures; some Ministers have cowered away and hidden from it. The message is simple: wash your hands, keep your distance, wear a mask, adhere to the guidance, and let us get out of this COVID environment so that we do not have to talk about it in 2021.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Seo muid arís i mbun díospóireachta ar srianta a mhaolú nuair atá líon na ndaoine ionfhabhtaithe ag méadú agus srianta eile á maolú. Once again, we find ourselves debating relaxations to restrictions at a time when, sadly, infections are rising and further restrictions are actively under discussion.

The Committee for Health considered this statutory rule on 24 September and was advised that it amends the regulations by removing soft-play areas from businesses, services providers and premises that are required to close. The briefing and discussion addressed this rule and another which is to come before the House at a later date. While the Committee did not raise any specific concerns in relation to this rule and agreed to support its confirmation, the focus of discussion remained, as it has for some months, on the clarity, communication, rationale and data underpinning the overall approach to restrictions and their relaxation.

Tá an Coiste i mbun cainte go fóill leis an Aire agus tá siad ag iarraidh tuilleadh sonraí faoin fhianaise ar a bhfuil cinntí sna rialacha reachtúla atá ag teacht chun tosaigh bunaithe. The Committee remains in dialogue with the Minister and is seeking to obtain more detail on the evidence base that underpins the decisions that are reflected in the statutory rules that are coming forward. The Committee has had and continues to have regular briefings from the Minister, and it is seeking to play a constructive role in scrutinising the response to the pandemic while promoting an adherence to the regulations and guidance and helping to assist in the communication of changes to the rules.

I will make a few remarks in my role as Sinn Féin's spokesperson for health. I think that it is notable today that the Minister has set out some of the impacts that this has had. It makes me angry when I see people on street corners extolling people to not take this seriously and to not abide by the regulations because it is all some kind of a conspiracy, and I think that that is extremely dangerous. It essentially encourages young people to take a chance and exhorts older and vulnerable people to take themselves out of society in order to protect themselves, and those are not approaches that we can accept.

I ask the public to continue to abide by the restrictions. I recognise that they are difficult, onerous and not to be taken lightly. The Committee for Health does not approve of them lightly; it is because they are necessary to deal with the pandemic. Faoi dheireadh, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle, tá mé cinnte de go mbeidh gach duine d'aon ghuth liomsa agus ár ndlúthpháirtíocht a chur in iúl don lucht oibre a d'fhulaing an oiread sin agus

atá anois ag tabhairt aghaidh ar an dúshlán atá amach romhainn. In closing, I am sure that colleagues will join me in expressing solidarity with a workforce that has endured so much and that is now buckling down to help us to meet the challenge of the coming weeks, as the virus is spreading and circulating. I ask everyone to consider all the front-line health and social care workers and their protection and to protect themselves and each other.

Mrs Cameron: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, it is good to have you back in the hot seat. Be in no doubt that if you need another lift to hospital and to be told what to do, I will be there for you. I should add that I wore my mask when I took him in the car because we could not socially distance.

Obviously, the rule amends the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 by removing soft-play areas from the list of businesses, services providers and premises that are subject to closure. We are, of course, all aware that we are debating these regulations after the events have taken place. It is well-documented why that is the case, which is the nature of the emergency health regulations.

We find ourselves in a very concerning situation, and I am sure that all of us shared the shock that was expressed by the Health Minister when we heard recently that there were almost 1,000 positive COVID tests in a single day. The vast majority of people across Northern Ireland have sacrificed so much in the last six months in order to curtail the virus, yet we now find ourselves in a position that is, quite frankly, alarming.

The restrictions introduced for indoor gatherings, outdoor gatherings and a range of other areas are necessary. They are not a choice; they are a necessity. If we are able to control the spread of the virus and to protect our elderly and vulnerable, it is simply the right thing to do in order to stop the wrong thing happening, which is lives being lost. We have more localised restrictions, and I commend the people in those areas for their adherence to those measures. Personal sacrifice for the greater good has been the action of the majority, and we thank them for that. I welcome that the soft-play areas have opened for all the good reasons outlined by junior Minister Kearney today.

We still have that minority who think that they are above the regulations and the guidance and that their interests trump all else. The pictures that appeared in recent weeks from GAA activities more than once were, quite simply, scandalous. In Dungannon and Bellaghy, we have seen the sacrifice of many of the people in those areas being mocked by crowds at games and in post-match celebrations. That is wrong. The GAA is to be commended for its very charitable role in responding to the need of the community, and I am very happy to acknowledge that. However, that good work does not excuse the blatant flouting of life-saving rules and regulations, and I am glad to see that the GAA is taking some action over those regulation breaches. We hear much about leadership, and I would like to hear the leadership of Sinn Féin say that those activities are wrong and to condemn them. Of course, you cannot condemn people for doing what you do yourself, and the deputy First Minister and Members opposite unfortunately sent out a message that the restrictions could be ignored and that nobody would tell them what to do or how to behave. Today, we see the consequences of their actions, with the daily positive case count rising.

I will take this opportunity to again highlight the importance of hands, face and space. We all know it, but we still need to be told to wash and sanitise our hands regularly, cover our faces where social distancing is difficult or not possible and keep space from others. Those are the most basic measures that allow life to continue in a pandemic, and if we do not follow those simple measures we will see our health service being overwhelmed, which will put an unbearable strain on our healthcare workers while they do their absolute best to take care of us all. Let us stop the selfish nonsense of knowing more than scientists and health experts. We must find a way to allow our children to have an education and our businesses to survive.

We have the power within us to do what is right. We have an individual responsibility to set an example and to adhere to and promote the rules and to call out wrongdoing regardless of where it comes from. The next weeks and months will see more families broken-hearted and more families added to the 585 who have already been affected. Let us all commit to doing what we can to make sure that as few families as possible have to go through that trauma.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr McNulty is not in his place, so I call his colleague Ms Sinead McLaughlin.

4.00 pm

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and thank you, Minister, for your statement. We appreciate the seriousness of the situation that we find ourselves in, but it is important that our communication is right.

We are discussing the relaxing of some regulations while imposing harsher ones in some areas. I appreciate that this is a tightrope and a balancing act, trying to protect lives and livelihoods, but it is not clear messaging. The Assembly is trying to get the public to adhere to the regulations when we are giving mixed messages.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the regulations as amended. I do so with considerable concern. I put on record the hardship that many owners of soft-play areas went through in the months when they were closed. We all received emails from them. It was disappointing that they were given an opening date that was then rescinded. I understand the thinking behind that, but a lot of them really felt the pressure, especially with the retention of staff.

When the regulations came into operation on 11 September, the trend was just beginning to show an uptick in confirmed cases of the virus. Three weeks later, the situation has been transformed for the worse. Part of the reason for that continues to be the utterly confused messaging, as Sinead has just mentioned, sent out by the regulations themselves. I do not think that we have learned lessons from the last debate on the regulations. There remains considerable, if not more, confusion over what the various regulations mean, how they apply and what they are supposed to achieve. Rightly or wrongly, it is a simple fact that, if people do not understand why they are doing something, they are less likely to comply.

As I said then, we are aiming for voluntary compliance, but the truth is that we are often not getting it. That lack of compliance is often tied to the wrong turnings of the Executive Office and the Department of Health in how they have taken forward and put out the messaging and communication. As a result, less than two weeks after pubs opened, we have a rearguard action, with pleas being

made for people not to mix socially. Yet, the very point of pubs is to enable people to mix socially. What does that say? Even within the past fortnight, the Executive Office and the Department of Health were taking action that would inevitably increase social mixing; yet now they are telling people not to do so. That is not what the trends tell us about the rates of cases. The last time that we debated the regulations, I warned that a confused message would get a confused response, and that is what has happened. Even on days when 1,000 people were testing positive, people were packing into indoor venues. It is nonsense.

To set out effective regulation, we need to know how the virus behaves. I am extremely concerned that contact tracing appears to be understaffed, people are not being contacted for days after they need to be contacted and, frankly, we are not getting enough understanding of the virus. Two weeks ago, the First Minister and deputy First Minister confidently told us that household transmissions were the big issue. Yet, on Sunday, the Chief Scientific Adviser painted a rather different picture, one in which socially mixing in hospitality venues clearly plays a role but one in which, he had to admit, we do not know the origin of many infections. If we do not know, we have no option but to go on evidence from elsewhere and use basic common sense. Social mixing spreads the virus, so why are we so determined to open places whose purpose is to encourage social mixing? That is a basic failure of public policy. It is not evidence-based. We need more information in the public domain about how the Executive make such decisions.

As I said last time, communication is about creating understanding. Compliance and enforcement will be easier if the rules are simple, understandable and enforceable. If our concern is that people should not socially mix, let us put in place regulations and guidance that make that clear consistently and coherently. If we do not want social mixing, do not open venues that exist purely to provide it. If we think that face coverings are important, they should be compulsory at all indoor venues except, perhaps, when eating, where tables are appropriately distanced, or when people are exercising on appropriately distanced equipment.

Last time, I said that I thought that there was still goodwill towards the Executive, but ongoing missteps mean that the public are rapidly losing confidence. As a result, even as case numbers have spiralled out of control, life has gone on almost as normal, with people even queuing to get into pubs and shops. We need to communicate better the regulations and the guidance around them, with less confusion and more clarity, to achieve our stated objective of less social mixing, to reverse the trends in the spread of the virus and to ensure that our health service does not become a "COVID service", as my colleague Pat Sheehan mentioned at the Health Committee recently. We also need to accept where we got it wrong and take the necessary steps to fix it. We have a small window of opportunity.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, given that the junior Minister — I hope that he will not be offended by my saying this — took a bit of a liberty in going beyond the confines of soft-play areas, I allowed Ms Bradshaw to do the same. She referred to contact tracing: I do not think that the junior Minister's statement referred to that at any point. I may be wrong on that, and, if I am, I apologise. Will Members at least try

to comment on the content, wide as it was, of the junior Minister's statement?

Mr Sheehan: First, I welcome you back to the Speaker's Chair, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Your wit and humour have been missed during your absence.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I do not believe that for a second.

Mr Sheehan: I assure you that I am being very sincere, and I hope that you remain in good health in the time ahead.

I support the regulations as amended. They deal with the reopening of soft-play centres and are a relaxation of the previous draconian legislation. We have all been here many times dealing with these regulations, and most agree that they have been draconian, albeit necessary to get to grips with the pandemic.

In many ways, the regulations are like part of a contract. We ask people to abide by the regulations, and, in return, they expect us to keep them safe. We ask them to adhere to social distancing, to wash their hands and all of those other measures like wearing masks and so on. In turn, for accepting those draconian regulations, they expect us to do our best to keep them safe.

The Principal Deputy Speaker said that we should not move into the area of testing and tracing. I do not want to do so, but that is part of the contract of the regulations and the system that is in place to keep people safe. Testing and tracing is essential to keeping people safe, and, at the minute, there are difficulties with it. This morning, we saw a letter signed by 13 senior medics from different hospitals who say that the testing and tracing system needs fixed. We saw difficulties across the water yesterday, where 16,000 people were not traced because of a technical malfunction. If we, as political leaders, are to do our best to keep people safe, we must get over those difficulties.

There is a contract. We ask the public to sign up to that contract and to be party to it, but we have to carry out our part of the contract.

Ms Anderson: I also welcome you back. We have missed you at the Committee meetings. I hope that you stay well.

It will be difficult to discuss the issue without widening it. I appreciate the fact that you will allow us to at least respond, and I will try my best to fit what I want to say into a response to what the junior Minister said.

We are dealing with the amendment to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations. Obviously, we know that some of the regulations have been superseded by further restrictions that the Assembly will deal with at a later date. The amendment is to remove the requirement for soft-play facilities to be subject to closure. Officials confirm that, despite those added restrictions to places such as Derry and Strabane, such facilities can remain open with appropriate precautions. I was concerned that, if that had not been the case for Derry and Strabane, for instance, we would have been sending out a signal that would have made people very confused. People who operate such facilities were confused over the weekend. They were contacting us and did not know whether they could stay open. It is important to note that officials have confirmed that they are still operating in the

same way, and that message needs to be heard across the Derry and Strabane area.

As the Minister said, the motion addresses the concerning rate of COVID-19 spread. I listened to the figure being read out of 599 and then today's figure of 3,630, so we can see how alarming it is. We can also see that all the restrictions are vital in addressing this deadly virus and trying to get it under control. My constituency of Foyle is part of Derry and Strabane District Council, where, from last Tuesday to this Tuesday, 876 people have COVID-19. When the regulations were brought in, I knew no one in my constituency with COVID-19. Now, there are probably very few people in Derry and Strabane who do not know someone who has COVID-19 or at least know people who are self-isolating. Such is the alarming rate of spread that not a day goes by without someone telling me a name of a person whom I know. When the first wave was at its height and we were all discussing it, I knew no one. Up to the end, there was one person in the city whom I knew.

I think that people are getting the message. Ministers have said today and in the past that we are the hosts of the virus. We are the carriers of this deadly virus, and it is spreading at an alarming rate. Fortunately, Derry and Strabane, like many areas across the North, has a fantastic community infrastructure. That includes the offering that has been made from soft play and elsewhere. We have a community and voluntary sector with people in it who have gone beyond the call of duty and will do so again. I believe that we will get this under control.

I listened to the figures that the Minister gave us, and, like everyone here, my heart was sore at the first wave, particularly as we were dealing with vulnerable people in care homes. We were all running around ragged at times, trying to secure PPE for them and trying to get people protected. Today, we hear that 31 of our care homes are battling to stop the further spread of the virus. Carers and workers in care homes have been mentioned.

We have been talking about soft-play areas, and there is soft evidence — it is subjective evidence, not scientific evidence — that some carers who are agency workers do not qualify for any kind of financial support. I know that there are some in my constituency. If, for instance, they are self-isolating, they do not even qualify for statutory sick pay, because they are agency workers. They go from one care home or house to another, because that is their job. The fact is that they may feel that they have to carry on working. If we are talking about trying to curb the spread of this deadly virus in the middle of a second wave, as we are in now, we need to be mindful of the implications for those workers.

4.15 pm

We have also mentioned people who are recently self-employed. Some owners of soft-play areas are recently self-employed. They have facilities that were closed down at the time, and they were not able to get any financial assistance. Many people from different political parties in the Chamber have raised the issue. At the weekend, I spoke to one owner of a small business. He is running on empty. He heard the Economy Minister say that he had fallen through the cracks. He received nothing from the hardship fund or from the two grants. Recently self-employed people, including people who operate soft-play

facilities and others, have been struggling throughout the pandemic.

When we put restrictions in place, we need to keep in mind the financial package that will be coming forward to deal with some of those facilities that had recently reopened. Some pubs spent a fortune, when they did not really have it, in order to try to reopen, and now they are having to close again. Thankfully, we have been told that soft-play areas are not closing, although they must ensure that they follow all the precautions. We know that people are struggling at this time.

As a community, Derry and Strabane is probably no different from any other. It is a community of people who will look out for one another and go beyond the call of duty to make sure that we get the virus under control. The junior Minister mentioned the figures for the number of people who are infected. We know now that 89 people, I believe, are in hospital, with 13 of them in ICU.

I want to talk about the hospital in my constituency. Thankfully, Altnagelvin is a fantastic hospital. I had brought to the Minister of Health the case of a man who, separate from all that has been going on, had been waiting five years for a hip replacement. He got an apology, but he is still waiting. The orthopaedic ward is closing because, we believe, it has to be repurposed owing to COVID. I am concerned about the disruption that that will cause to services across hospitals.

Given the figures that the junior Minister gave us today, it is difficult to focus on the issue of soft-play areas. Across this island, 53,908 people have been affected. That is an alarming figure. People need to hear more of that kind of language, if they have not heard it previously, coming from Ministers so that it resonates. Unfortunately, we know that, across the North and perhaps further afield, there are anti-mask campaigns — they may be small in number, but they are out there — and people saying that it is all a conspiracy. They are saying that the World Health Organization (WHO) is filling our heads full of sweetie mice and that the pandemic is not happening. This is serious. It is real. We all now know somebody who has been affected, be it in our family, neighbourhood or community. We all now need to work collectively. I believe that we can. Unfortunately, however, if we do not get a grip and get this under control, I do not think that this is the end of the conversation that we will be having about restrictions. Thank you for the latitude that you have given us all today. I really do appreciate it.

Mr O'Toole: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, like others, I welcome you back to your place. It is good to see.

Like others, I welcome the fact that this regulation is being changed. It feels slightly surreal to be talking about it. Up front, before we get on to the more serious matters, I should declare an interest in that, as the father of a three-year-old, I have a very specific interest in soft-play facilities being open, as, I am sure, do other parents of young children. I have had lots of correspondence from owners and operators of soft-play facilities who welcomed this clarity when the regulation was changed, and I am sure that, like myself, other parents welcomed the fact that these facilities, with specific sanitary and health measures in place, were able to reopen.

Having said that, and reflecting on the latitude that you have allowed us, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, the

specific regulation change that we are talking about today feels almost quaint and tiny, frankly, in relation to the seriousness of the statistics that are coming at us every day in relation to new infections and, now, not just new infections but increased hospitalisations.

Martina Anderson referred to the increase in the number of people hospitalised. If I have read it correctly, today's figures went from the early 60s to either 85 or 89. I think that it was an increase of nearly a third. In the last 24 hours, the number of people hospitalised with COVID-19 in Northern Ireland has increased by about a third, if I have got that correct. If I have not, I apologise to Members. However, if I have got that right, that is extremely serious. That is an extremely worrying increase, and it clearly reflects a shift in the pattern of this virus in the second wave.

We are not now in a lag period where increased socialisation is happening and therefore infections are increasing. We are probably in the second phase, where, because we have had a few weeks of increased socialisation and infections increasing, we are now seeing the medical impact of that in increased hospitalisations. It is, I am afraid, therefore inevitable that the next step in the weeks to come will be an increased number of deaths. That is unavoidable. That is almost an arithmetical fact, on the basis of the increase in infections and the increase in hospitalisations.

It is true, notwithstanding some of the surreal remarks coming from the White House, that medical professionals are better equipped now in terms of their understanding of this virus. There is a little more knowledge about treatment. I welcome what we have heard this morning from the Health Minister about preparedness and about getting the Nightingale facilities back up and running. That now seems like an inevitability, but I welcome much of what he said about increased capacity in the health service and increased procurement, over the past few months, of ventilators and PPE, which are, in a sense, two different parts of the NHS response to this virus. It is clear that, in the coming weeks, we will be entering — or have already entered, as I said — a very serious phase of this crisis.

The difficulty has been reflected a little in the debate today, because every Member who has spoken has done so with complete sincerity and seriousness about their constituents, about this place and about the public health response, but it is also clear that there is a deficit in clarity around policymaking for this jurisdiction. I do not say that to score points against either of the Ministers here, the parties they represent or, indeed, the Executive as a whole. My party is a participant, and it is a five-party Executive, as the junior Minister said. I agree with that. This is one for all of us, but it is true that it will be a uniquely difficult challenge for the Executive.

It will be uniquely difficult for two reasons. First, the first part of the COVID crisis involved, in a sense, a very clear sense of purpose. It involved a very clear message that had to be communicated to people, not just in this society but society everywhere. Stay at home. Lock down. Limit your contacts. While we are saying those things now, we are saying them with caveats and with a degree of shade, as it were.

It is also true that some of that shade is necessary. I am not going to stand here today and say that we should lock down tomorrow. I could not stand over that

recommendation as a public representative. Nor can I say that I am anything other than deeply concerned about the path of the virus and that large parts of our society are not just open as before but that there appears to be, as others have said, a real challenge around observance of current best practice, not just the restrictions and the regulations but mask wearing and social distancing. That is the first part. That is the first challenge that the Executive face.

The first phase of COVID was more straightforward. We were telling people, "Do not leave the house other than for a little bit of exercise or to get your shopping". That is a challenge that all jurisdictions face, and it is one that they will have to navigate. The best way of navigating it will be getting everybody at the Assembly — certainly everyone who is a public representative — and the wider community on board with why the guidance remains more complicated than it was in March. What I mean by that is that, if we are not locking down everywhere but are going to have a more tailored, localised, lockdown approach, we need to know the Executive's working out. We need to understand the rationale for decisions.

The vast majority of the public want to follow the regulations, and they want to keep their families and their neighbours safe. The best way of ensuring that they do that is to treat them with a degree of seriousness and respect and to explain why certain restrictions are the way that they are. That includes explaining why, for example, certain restrictions have not been imposed on some businesses, licensed premises, restaurants or hospitality venues.

If the reason is that the Executive have made a decision to balance a pure public health response or a pure COVID limitation response with broader economic aims, that is not necessarily an illegitimate aim, but it has to be explained to people. It has to be explained why that balance has been struck and how those decisions have been made.

One of the junior Ministers has his head in his hands. I have no doubt that he is thinking about this every day and is probably having to think about those balances. That is the first challenge.

The second challenge, I am afraid, is one that is distinct to this place. It is the unique way in which we are set up geographically, jurisdictionally and, in a sense, culturally and societally, in that we look both east-west and North/South. We take our cues politically from other jurisdictions. That is not necessarily a dysfunctional thing; it is a natural thing. We share a land mass with the rest of Ireland. We have consistently called for an all-island approach to managing this virus, and I still think that that is critical.

I welcome lots of what I heard from the Health Minister today, and we need to see collaboration on that front. We also need to see very clear east-west collaboration. Not just because our economies are interlinked and there continue to be significant degrees of transit between Great Britain and Northern Ireland but also because, frankly, we will need to ensure that our public health and economic responses are tied into the funding package that we are getting from Whitehall and to the economic response that the United Kingdom Government is willing to make. We are, like it or not, bound into that structure, as the Finance Minister said today.

Our North/South and east-west preoccupation in this place is not irrational. It is a necessary and critical part of our

managing the holistic policy and public health response to this virus. However, we have a challenge there too. In those jurisdictions, the Administrations are finding it harder to be as consistent, unified and clear in their own approach to the virus as they were earlier this year. We saw what happened in the South, in the last 24 hours, with the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Chief Medical Officer and the difference in emphasis, to put it diplomatically, between medical advisers and Ministers in the South.

4.30 pm

We also see, in Britain, many and significant challenges around the UK Government's response to the virus, not least their officials' misuse of Excel in the last day or two. It is not just Whitehall's response to it. Today, we saw several metropolitan mayors in the north of England issue complaints about the way in which what are called "local lockdowns" are working in their jurisdictions of Liverpool, Manchester and elsewhere. They clearly want to manage the virus and keep it as low as possible in their jurisdictions, but they raise particular questions about how the lockdowns work in their areas. I do not have the answer to any of that, and it would be deeply disingenuous for me to stand here today and say, "Well, this is exactly what should happen; this is exactly the path that we need to follow".

I admit — it has been implicit in what most colleagues have said today — that we are entering into really complicated and genuinely uncharted territories with the trade-offs that we have to manage in the weeks and months ahead. We need to ensure, first of all, that the public health guidance is followed to the absolute maximum. That is what we have the most control over: that citizens in our society are absolutely clear about the steps that they need to take. Whatever the regulations are, whatever premises are open or closed, whatever the exact regulations are at any given moment, they need to take personal responsibility, first and foremost. It is clear that many people in various parts of our society have not been doing that over the last few weeks and months. If there is one thing that we have control over, it is how we message clearly to the public.

To come back to my overarching message, there are two specific but interlinked challenges. The Executive face a very difficult period ahead in deciding on the correct policy response to the, frankly, chilling increase in infections in our society and in managing that on a North/South and east-west basis and, most critically, communicating it in the most clear, consistent and transparent way possible to members of the public.

I have taken up enough of the Assembly's time, but let me just linger on that final point — transparency. We cannot pretend to our citizens that they are easy choices. If we pretend that they are easy choices, we risk them not following the guidance and not believing us because they cannot understand how the Executive have done their working out. My final plea, as the Executive make their considerations on how we proceed in the days and weeks ahead, is this: be absolutely clear in your public messaging. That is the best way of taking our society with us as we proceed through the next difficult few weeks and months.

Mr Allister: Principal Deputy Speaker, I am sure that all the warm words welcoming you back may have caused

you to think that you did not know that you were so popular. Savour the moment. I suspect that —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It has been a long time since the Member has had a moment like that *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: Indeed. *[Laughter.]* We are, undoubtedly, discussing a very serious issue, and COVID has, in all sorts of unpredictable ways, reached every corner of our society. Nothing that I say today will minimise the threat of COVID. I am conscious that, not having stood in the shoes of those who have suffered from COVID, one needs to be cautious about what one says going forward. In the course of my remarks, I will raise some issues about where we are going in tackling the pandemic.

Before I get there, it is important to say that, although the Executive, understandably, make plaintive pleas to people to do the right thing — I echo those pleas, as we all should act with the utmost responsibility, follow the public health guidance and not take it lightly — an abiding problem for them in their messaging is typified by the very presentation of the debate today. The motion was moved by a junior Minister who does not come to the issue with clean hands, so to speak. When it came to the test of that junior Minister on the critical issue of the Executive living by their own laws, he failed it because he was a participant in the most flagrant breach of the regulations by attending the Storey funeral at a time when the regulations said that people who were not family et cetera should not even be there. Therefore, when you bring a debate to a House such as this, hoping that the public are listening and heeding, and the presenter of that debate is one who, with his colleagues, thought himself to be above the very laws that he speaks to, there is a fundamental credibility problem. The same applies to the Member for Foyle Ms Anderson, who was very prominent in that flagrant breach of the law and who, indeed, at or about that time, was tweeting exultantly about wakes and all sorts of things. What sort of example of what sort of leadership has been set? Until the day comes when the Ministers and Members who put themselves in that position unequivocally, with no weasel words, apologise to the public, whom they exhort to follow the rules, for not following the rules themselves by attending that funeral et cetera, the Executive will be beset with a credibility issue on the regulations. That is the reality. Some might like to duck and dive and pretend otherwise, but that is the reality.

Maybe it is no surprise that, when political leaders set that example, other organisations, never mind individuals, think that they too can be above the law. We have seen that with some of the GAA gatherings that Mrs Cameron referred to, where, for three successive Sundays, we saw social-distancing breaches and all of that. Yesterday, we had a statement from the GAA acknowledging the difficulties and saying that it was going to cancel club matches, but it has not cancelled inter-county matches. If what I read today is correct, it is still anticipated that up to 400 people can be at such matches. Organisations too have an obligation to give leadership. I question whether that has been there with the depth and sincerity that are needed.

The question that I have to ask about all the regulations is this: where are we going with them? Is all the action that we are taking about delaying COVID, or is it about defeating COVID? If it is about defeating COVID, should the fit and healthy not have a role in allowing immunity to grow? If, every time the virus raises its ugly head, our

response is to shut things down, how do we ever get off the roundabout? Unless the virus obliges us by dying out or a vaccine is found — that seems some way off — by this course of action, we are constantly saying that our only answer is that, when the virus rises, we close down. Is that the sum and substance of the strategy?

Some countries have maybe shown that there is another way, and there has been much reference to Sweden. Immunity has been disparagingly called “herd immunity”, but community immunity among the fit and healthy may be an approach that will have to be considered. Bearing in mind the economic and mental health consequences, I do not see how we go on indefinitely repeating the same answer that is not an answer. I ask where we are going with our approach. What is the strategy? Do we not need to get to the point at which we severely ring-fence the vulnerable but allow the rest of society largely to get on with their lives in the expectation and hope that it will create rising community immunity? The attitude is that, if there is a big rise in the number of cases — not, happily, a great rise in the number of deaths or a great rise in the number of intensive care patients — we say, “We must be severe in our clampdown. As the cases rise, we must come down on the movements of the community”. Our proportionality is about restrictions proportionate to the number of cases, not the number of deaths. That strategy will never create a strategy for getting out of this situation.

I say to the Executive that there has to be wider thinking about where exactly we are going. Now, mistakes will be made — that is an inevitability when handling something like this — and you need a safety net and a capacity to take quick countermeasures. However, there needs to be a strategy in mind that is more than just reacting to the rise in the number of cases. If we keep doing that, when will we ever get out of this? That is my question.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak. I call the junior Minister, Gordon Lyons, to make a winding-up speech and conclude the debate on the motion.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I join other Members in welcoming you back to your place and wishing you good health for the future.

I welcome today’s debate and thank Members for their contributions. As we are all acutely aware, COVID-19 is not only having an impact on our health but having a significant societal and economic impact.

4.45 pm

The Executive’s response to the crisis has always been aimed at delivering a balanced and proportionate package of measures across all those areas. We bring in restrictions only when necessary and relax them as soon as they are no longer required. The reopening of soft-play areas on 14 September is evidence of that, and the guidance published on the Executive’s website provides owners with a blueprint for opening in a safe and controlled manner, taking into consideration the protection of staff and customers. The recent restrictions that were put in place across domestic settings, on hospitality closing times and in the Londonderry and Strabane area remind us of the stark position that we find ourselves in.

It is important to remember that the increase in the number of confirmed positive cases is not just because more tests are taking place. As the Health Minister and the CMO have said, the increase in confirmed cases is because the transmission rate has increased and continues to do so. The number of positive cases is of serious concern to the Executive, and I know that it is also of concern to all parts of our society, including individuals, families and businesses. If the rate of increase is allowed to continue, it will, inevitably, lead to an increase in hospital admissions and deaths, and we must do everything that we can to minimise that risk.

I will turn to some of the comments made by Members. I will try to touch on most of the issues but, in particular, those that are most pertinent to the regulations that are in front of us today. First, I was not aware that Mr McGrath had to self-isolate, and I send our best wishes to him and his family. However, in filling in for Mr McGrath, the Deputy Chairperson of the Executive Office Committee, Mr Beattie, rightly identified the benefits of improved well-being by having soft-play areas open. Of course, we must use them safely and in accordance with the published guidance. The Member mentioned enforcement, and it is important to emphasise that enforcement alone will not tackle the issues that we have in front of us, although it is important and will become increasingly so as we get beyond the “explain and encourage” stage. We all need to work in partnership with one another by following the core public health messages. I thank Mr Beattie for his contribution.

Colm Gildernew and Paula Bradshaw raised issues in relation to the evidence base. Scientific evidence is provided to the Executive, and the decision on when that should be published is a matter for the Executive as a whole. Departments submit proposals for the relaxation of regulations to the Department of Health. Their proposals include supporting evidence such as reports by various bodies and submissions from stakeholders. That information is reviewed by the CMO and the CSA, who have access to information from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), the Government advisory group, and other groups from across the UK, the Republic of Ireland and internationally. A professional assessment is made on that basis, including where the country is in the pandemic and the R rate.

I also want to pick up on Mrs Cameron’s comments. I congratulate her for her heroic role in making sure that our Principal Deputy Speaker is with us today. She also recognised the important role that our NHS staff have played in the pandemic thus far. It is important, of course, that we take these actions and obey the regulations so that we can protect them as well. We are at a critical phase in the pandemic, so it is important that we all play our part to help to suppress the virus.

Sinead McLaughlin made a number of comments about communication, and I wholeheartedly agree with her. Mr O’Toole mentioned that communication was easy at the start of the pandemic because, when everything had to close, the message was simple. Of course, it is much more difficult now, and I agree with the Member that communication is key. The Executive have tried to get information out as quickly as possible. I hope that the Member, along with others from the Foyle and West Tyrone constituencies, appreciated the fact that, last week,

as Executive Ministers, we took the opportunity to explain the reasoning behind some of the restrictions that were coming in. We hope to keep Members updated in that format in future. It has been recognised that the Executive Office has increased the number of its written statements to the House to explain the reasoning behind some of the things that we have done. I appreciate the Member's comments in that regard.

Mr Sheehan made a number of comments about test and trace, as did Ms Bradshaw. I will not go into those any further, but I am sure that Mr Sheehan knows that they have been placed on the record; I think that that is what he was trying to do, rather than get an answer from me. Ms Anderson made a number of comments. It is, of course, absolutely right that schemes are to be introduced for businesses that will have to endure the additional restrictions. The job retention scheme is still in place. She also mentioned the increasing infection rates. That reminds us that the threat from COVID-19 is still here; it is still a problem, and it still needs to be dealt with. That is why we, as an Executive, will take appropriate and proportionate action when necessary.

I have already touched on the issue that Mr O'Toole raised in relation to the difficulties that we face now compared to where we were before. Of course, we are making policy decisions in a very difficult environment. He is absolutely right: we need to balance economic and societal needs with the pressing health needs. It is important that we recognise the costs that we have seen already from lockdown.

We do not take these decisions lightly. We understand — any MLA who is in touch with their constituency and constituents at all will understand — the effects that lockdown had on our constituents. I know special needs children who missed out on speech and language therapy, on carers coming in, music therapy, play therapy, physiotherapy and developmental opportunities. We are all aware of the effect that it has had on older people in terms of isolation. We have heard sad stories of older people in nursing homes who have not been able to see their family and the effect that that has had on their mental health.

Obviously, these periods of restriction have had an effect on the mental health of the wider population. We know about the effect that domestic violence has had over this period; lockdown gave an opportunity for abusers to have more control. I think that a lot of charities recorded the highest volume of calls on record over that period.

We also know — Mrs Cameron frequently raises this during debates — about the non-COVID-19-related impact that lockdown has had on physical health. GPs, dentists and other healthcare providers often pick up on greater issues that a person might have with their health. We need to be wary of that. We need also to think about the effect that it has had on the education of our children, when schools were not open. We have to think about funerals; people did not have the proper opportunity to grieve. We need to think of all those issues, and that is before we even touch on the economy, jobs and the people who have struggled during this time. Some people have not received the help that they would have liked. We need to take into consideration the fact that unemployment and poverty also cost lives and have a detrimental impact on our society.

All the issues stemming from restrictions and lockdown come with a cost; we are aware of that. Some of those costs are quantifiable, but many are not. That is why we need to ensure that we take everything into consideration and only take actions that are proportionate. Mr O'Toole is right: we need to balance COVID-19 issues with economic and societal issues. Mr O'Toole also mentioned a number of issues around surge planning. The Minister of Health will have addressed those earlier today.

I fully appreciate the sincerity with which Mr Allister approached the debate. There has been a concerning rise in the number of cases. There is often a lag in the reporting of hospitalisations, hospital admissions and deaths. We do not know the full impact of those at this time. We also have to take into consideration the fact that we have already brought in further restrictions on household gatherings. The Chief Scientific Adviser has informed us that, I think, 44% of COVID cases can be traced back to household settings. I hope that we will start to see the results of the actions that we took first in Ballymena, then in Belfast and later across Northern Ireland. Hopefully, we will see a reduction in cases and not an increase in the number of hospital admissions and deaths.

I appreciate that the Member is saying that there are different approaches that can be taken. I can assure him that our advisers look at data from all over the world, including the examples that he gave. The Chief Medical Officer has said this to us, however: what is the ultimate goal? The ultimate goal here is a vaccine, whereby we can build up immunity. These steps may be required in the short term, however, to keep the rate of transmission down.

I am sure that the Department will respond in writing in the days ahead to those Members whose points I have not addressed. To conclude my remarks, I want to say that we appreciate that this is a difficult time for everyone. More restrictions are not what any of us wants. I know that people are sick and tired of them. I am sick and tired of them. I am sure that we all are. We long for life to go back to normal. The temptation is to think that we are already there and to act accordingly. That would be wrong. As always, we must continue to be extremely careful in all aspects of our lives, particularly as we think of those in our community who are vulnerable. It is vital that everyone continue to follow the consistent public health messaging and that business owners and members of the public adhere to the advice and measures that are put in place.

I encourage us all to play our part: to maintain social distancing; to maintain good hand and respiratory hygiene; to wear a face covering; and to self-isolate immediately if we experience any symptoms, including a new persistent cough, a fever or a loss of or change in smell or taste. We need to seek a test if we experience any of those symptoms. We need to download the StopCOVID NI app and comply with the restrictions that are in place.

I know that this is a difficult time for all of us. It has been a very difficult few months for many different people, and there have been lots of grim warnings about what comes next. I place on record the fact that, one day, we will be beyond COVID. We will get to the other side of this. It is important that we have some hope and that we give some hope for the future. We can all make sure that we get there quicker, however. We can stop additional sickness and

hospitalisations by following the regulations that have been placed before us. I commend them to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

5.00 pm

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

Private Members' Business

COVID-19: Impact of Restrictions on Workers and the Economy

Ms McLaughlin: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the profound impact of COVID-19 restrictions on workers and the economy; notes projections that more than 100,000 people in Northern Ireland could be unemployed by the end of 2020; further notes with regret that many businesses are excluded from current support schemes; notes the positive impact of wage subsidy programmes as a critical lifeline to small businesses and those struggling to make ends meet; expresses regret that the Minister for the Economy has not produced a COVID-19 recovery strategy that provides support to workers and businesses asked to restrict their trading capacity; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Minister of Finance to bring forward a radical economic intervention programme that supports wages, creates pathways for those who have lost their jobs to re-enter the labour market, promotes new jobs and closes regional imbalances.

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.

Ms McLaughlin: We are living through and trying to guide our communities and local businesses through one of the most challenging public health and economic crises in living memory. This is not an easy time for any of us, least of all for those workers and businesses whose livelihoods hang in the balance. I also want to acknowledge that these are not easy times to be a Minister. We have not experienced a challenge like this before, so it is inevitable that the Executive will not get everything right. Our Ministers are human and, like all of us, they make mistakes, but, in the current environment, mistakes will inevitably have exaggerated impacts, so it is important that they remain open to constructive feedback, and that is the basis on which we approach the debate.

Rishi Sunak got it right with the furlough scheme, but he got it wrong with its replacement, the job support scheme. The result is that more than 100,000 people in Northern Ireland are likely to lose their jobs. Across the UK, it could transpire that 2 million people will be made redundant.

We all have sympathies for those Ministers who have to take tough decisions in a demanding environment, but that does not mean that we can ignore the sense that the Department for the Economy appears to be rudderless; a bit like a small boat being tossed around in a gale and not certain which shore or port it will end up in. The Department must do two things at once: it must navigate through the crisis while preparing for when the crisis is over. I am not confident that it is fit for those purposes.

First, let us consider the immediate challenge. In all our communities there are people who are deeply distressed about the impact that the COVID crisis will have on their family, the security of their jobs and the health of their loved ones. How many people have called each of our offices in absolute despair because they do not know how they will provide for themselves and/or their children? How many have called, deeply and justifiably angry, because they do not see government digging deep to help in their moment of need?

Too many businesses, self-employed workers and others have not received the security of a support scheme to give them the confidence that they will make it through the coming months. Let us consider the groups that have been excluded from the various support schemes: the newly self-employed; those who are self-employed but trade as a company; low-paid, casual workers; businesses that share premises; social enterprises; the arts and freelance artists. They have all been particularly badly hit, with support coming very late for some and not at all for others.

About 10,000 small businesses in Northern Ireland have been excluded from support, and remember that Northern Ireland, much more than Great Britain, is an economy of small and microbusinesses. Yet, we find that, according to an estimate by the Audit Office, around £13.5 million was paid out from the small business grant scheme in error. Moreover, around £65 million was underspent in the hardship fund. That is a lot of money, around £80 million in total, that could have gone to the right hands. My office has heard terrible stories of hardship and distress from childminders right through to individual consultants, hairdressers etc, as have all Members of this House, I am sure.

What is the solution? We have to rescue what we can by re-evaluating our support schemes and making sure that they are fair and properly administered, particularly in the light of the latest restrictions imposed on communities and businesses, and particularly in my constituency in the north-west. I make this impassioned plea here, today, for support for businesses in Derry and Strabane that have had to freeze their operations, not because of their actions but because of our decisions and the impact of the virus.

At the same time as we support businesses in need, we must build a new economy as part of a new society. We need long-term recovery as well as short-term rescue. At the end of this crisis, we will have the same challenges that we had before it. If the problem has not changed, the solution has not changed either, as John Hume used to say repeatedly.

We offer our solution. The SDLP has laid down four principles for the economic recovery of the North: a new deal for our young people, providing them with skills and opportunities as we emerge from our economic crisis; a new localism, rewarding those businesses that have helped us survive in this crisis; new infrastructure to help us build our way out into recovery; and new powers for the Northern Ireland institutions to enable us to raise funds needed to invest in that recovery.

The underlying problems facing the North are infrastructure, skills, productivity and the inequality that lies at the very heart of our society. Infrastructure, obviously, means roads, rail and water, and those are public services, but it also means doing what we can to promote private-sector investment in infrastructure. We need to speed

up our roll-out of the higher-speed broadband that will assist rural areas. We need to accelerate spending on the electricity grid. If we can get construction work going and moving quickly on broadband and on the North/South electricity interconnector, that will assist the creation of new jobs.

That is equally true about major road building, which Minister Mallon has recognised with the fast-tracking of the work on the A6. Indeed, Minister Mallon's team of infrastructure experts has turned round its review of infrastructure provision in just six weeks. That is a great example of how quickly Stormont and its work can proceed when leadership is shown.

We must also invest in carbon infrastructure, kick-starting the green new deal. Our neighbours are about to spend massive sums on retrofitting homes to reduce carbon emissions and home heating costs. We need to do the same, whilst scaling up our commitment to zero-emission energy sources, electric and hydrogen vehicles, carbon capture and large-battery technologies.

Then we have skills. Here, I will congratulate Minister Dodds. She has done exactly what the SDLP called for: she has allocated additional funds to apprenticeships and college vocational training. Well done, Minister. However, we also need to boost investment in training adults who have jobs — those who may lose their jobs in the coming weeks, and those who, we hope, are safe in their jobs. We have to improve skills and improve the use of knowledge in order to raise our productivity.

We must also do much more to tackle imbalances in our economy. We have to raise the skills and aspirations of people living in our poorest communities. That divide is unacceptable, but, for some reason, society has accepted it, so it reoccurs generation after generation. To change that, we must ensure that our schools, preschool support, careers guidance and skills training systems provide ways to enable people to advance into better, and better-paid, jobs. Let us remember the joint commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' to focus on creating good jobs and protecting workers' rights with security of employment. We have heard little from Minister Dodds about any long-term vision. If we do not know where we want to get to, we are much more likely to get lost along the way. My fear is that the satnav destination has not yet been set. The terrible truth is that many of the jobs that society relied on before the crisis will no longer exist when the crisis ends. We must therefore do all that we can to create the new generation of well-paid jobs that must emerge as we reshape society and the economy when the crisis is over.

The Executive do not have a Programme for Government, an economic strategy, a skills strategy, an energy strategy or agreement on infrastructure priorities. That cannot go on. I call on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Minister of Finance to plan for long-term recovery and, with all Departments, to bring forward a radical economic intervention programme that supports wages, creates pathways for those made unemployed to re-enter the labour market, promotes new jobs and closes regional imbalances. It is at a time of crisis when you have to take the opportunity to build back better. That comes down to leadership.

Mr Dunne: No doubt, the global pandemic has had a profound impact on our economy and employees across

Northern Ireland. It is important to recognise the significant amount of financial support that has been delivered to businesses, contrary to what we have just heard. Local funding schemes that have been initiated by our Economy Minister, through her Department, have complemented the various financial support measures from our UK Government.

The recently announced job support scheme, as the successor to the furlough scheme, is designed to support viable jobs and businesses that will, unfortunately, face lower than usual demand over the winter and will need more time to recover. The extension of the self-employment income support scheme until April 2021 is another welcome commitment from the Chancellor.

The value of being within our great United Kingdom through such a challenging time in our history must be acknowledged. All those measures have been a lifeline to thousands of businesses and employees across Northern Ireland, in every town and village and in our rural areas.

Many sectors of our local economy, including tourism, hospitality and retail, to name a few, continue to face huge challenges. We are in a different space from where we were in March and April. That is why future support must be strategic, targeted and have a positive and sustainable economic impact. The Economy Minister very much recognises that. 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', a medium-term recovery plan that was published in June, rightly prioritises decisive interventions to sustain and rebuild our economy over the next 12 to 18 months.

The Minister launched two new support schemes in early September. The £1 million digital selling capability grant was launched to help retailers and wholesalers generate business online, and the £5 million equity investment fund was targeted at early-stage and seed-stage SMEs.

Those are examples of strategic support to sustain and develop economic activity and to provide much-needed support for upskilling and developing online activity and marketing.

5.15 pm

The aerospace sector is another example of a sector that is facing major challenges globally. There must be a UK-wide solution, and I know that my party colleagues in Westminster and the Minister have pressed the UK Government extensively on the need for a sector-specific fund to sustain and develop our aerospace sector, which is such a valuable direct local employer, with Bombardier employing around 3,000 staff and many others involved in the supply chain.

Yesterday's announcement from the Economy Minister of £4.6 million investment to fund 3,000 online training places for people whose employment has been disrupted by the pandemic is exactly the sort of positive targeted financial support scheme that we need. Those courses, focusing on digital skills, will be delivered by our local colleges and universities and will complement the recently announced apprenticeship recovery package.

We must recognise the work and commitment of our local businesses, which have continued to work through the challenging past seven months and of which many have diversified and adapted their businesses. I was pleased recently to welcome the Minister to two such

local businesses in Bangor in North Down: the Denroy Group, which has been manufacturing visors and reusable masks, is working with the health service to supply it with much-needed PPE in the future; and Priory Press, which is a local packaging firm, is investing £1 million in new machinery in order to grow the business into new markets.

While we were on the shop floor of those manufacturing businesses, we were reminded that people are continuing to work very hard in order to keep their businesses running throughout the COVID crisis. Resources are limited, and we must be prudent and strategic with the interventions that we make and continue to get the balance right between protecting the health of our people whilst prioritising our local economy.

Dr Archibald: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. As I said yesterday in the debate on the Internal Market Bill, I am very mindful that, as we speak here today, there are businesses and workers who have faced very difficult circumstances over the past number of months and who continue to face uncertainty about the future, particularly in the context of the additional restrictions that have been introduced in the Derry and Strabane council area and of the rising cases across the island and in Britain, which may see further restrictions required.

We are all very aware that the health of our people and our economy are interlinked and that decisions have deep and long-term impacts. For that reason, I find it unjustifiable that the British Government are ending the furlough scheme at the end of this month. The replacement job support scheme will not be adequate to protect jobs, and there will be thousands of redundancies, which makes the support to protect those jobs to date seem somewhat futile.

The furlough scheme is a necessary support for those sectors that, as yet, cannot return to work or that will have to close again if restrictions are reimposed. The Economy Committee has written to the British Chancellor expressing its concerns about the removal of that vital support, and I know that the Finance Minister has also raised concerns on behalf of the Executive, sought clarifications and requested an urgent meeting with the Chancellor in order to discuss the emerging picture of additional restrictions. In the context of further restrictions, additional support for the Executive will be necessary to help to support businesses, protect jobs and support workers. We do not have the fiscal or borrowing powers to put in place the types of supports that are needed.

I believe that we need to see an economic recovery strategy that has definitive objectives for the short, medium and longer term and that is supported by actions that will achieve them. I believe that there is space for us to do things differently, to build on the experiences that we have had throughout the pandemic of finding alternative ways of working that give people flexibilities to have a better work-life balance and to begin to redress regional imbalances through, for example, the development of regional hubs for working.

In the midst of the health crisis that we still face and of the economic crisis that continues to grow, the climate emergency remains a dominant threat. Therefore, we need to realise the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to have a green new deal as part of any recovery strategy. Green skills development and infrastructure projects can be central to supporting young people to gain skills and

jobs and those who have been made unemployed to gain new skills and get back to work.

All those things can and should be incorporated in our economic recovery strategy. The Sinn Féin economic recovery strategy, which we published in June, incorporated those things across four priorities: supporting workers and their families; supporting businesses to create and sustain employment; delivering on a just transition; and giving the Executive the tools to aid recovery.

A recovery strategy must look to the type of economy and society that we want. I am not convinced that the economic recovery documents that have so far been brought forward by the Economy Minister and the Department for the Economy have the necessary ambition, supported by actions, to address the historical and structural difficulties in our local economy. It is my belief that such a strategy also requires a cross-Executive approach that involves other Departments, in particular, Infrastructure, DAERA and Communities. Indeed, the proposer of the motion mentioned infrastructure projects as part of the recovery, and I believe that the motion should be directed more widely.

Skills, training and employability programmes will also be central to the recovery to enable people to reskill and upskill, and, as Members mentioned, some positive steps have been made in that respect.

We need entrepreneur supports to encourage new business development. That said, I have to reflect on one point in the motion about those who have been excluded from supports to date and those who have been left behind and fallen through the cracks of other supports, such as our newly self-employed and sole traders, small manufacturers and some childcare providers. We need to give businesses and individuals the confidence to know that we will not simply reap the economic benefits of their innovation and labour in the good times but that we will support them through the bad times. I urge the Minister, once again, to look at how supports can be made available to the groups that remain excluded.

I support our looking forward to the type of recovery that we want. I recognise what the Minister said yesterday in response to my question about supporting businesses to build their capacity. However, for many, survival remains their only focus at this time. I urge the Minister, therefore, to look at how the allocations —

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

Dr Archibald: — for recovery funding can be best utilised here and now to support businesses. For businesses that were viable before COVID, help them to get through this winter and give them a chance to continue to operate and recover, and support jobs and workers into the future.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for Foyle for proposing the motion. I recognise her experience in a previous life, and the knowledge and expertise that she brings to the discussion.

To even talk about a figure of 100,000 job losses is frightening. That is 100,000 families, with four or five people per family. It means that a quarter of our population could be affected. It is impossible to overstate the gravity of the impact. The BBC reports today that economists are predicting a contraction of 11% in the Northern Ireland economy, with an estimated growth of only 7% next

year. Members of the Committee for the Economy heard recently that it could take four or five years to see a return to pre-COVID levels in our economy.

As I said, I thank the proposer of the motion. The Minister should see the motion for what it is, and hopefully it is not seen as political point-scoring or as a means of attack. Most if not all of us want to play a constructive role in contributing to the economy and making sure that we can feed into a process whereby the economy can grow, and we can save as many jobs as possible and make as many businesses flourish as possible.

The motion rightly refers to business owners and businesses that have so far been unable to avail themselves of any support grants. It is regrettable that, three weeks on, even after a unanimous vote in the House, nothing has come forward. I hope that the Minister is working with her colleagues.

Mr Chambers: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: Yes.

Mr Chambers: Does the Member agree that it is important that nobody in the community should be left to feel that they have fallen through the net in receiving financial assistance from the Executive?

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

Mr Stewart: That is exactly the key. In our offices, we hear of so many examples of people who have battled, borrowed and done whatever they can to survive while clinging on and hoping that support would come. It is lamentable that we are so far down the line, and those people have still have not been able to access financial assistance. I truly hope that support is coming.

The proposer rightly points out the vital life-saving support from the Treasury. Whether it is the self-employment or furlough scheme, they have undoubtedly been essential in staving off massive job losses. Like others, I lament the fact that the scheme will end too soon. It is perhaps penny wise and pound foolish to decide to cut off the furlough scheme immediately and not even support those industries that cannot get back to work. The motion unfairly calls on the Minister and her Department to replace that funding. As the Chair of the Economy Committee said, the vast amount required — billions of pounds — is simply not in the coffers of the Executive. It is important that we recognise the level of intervention that has come from Her Majesty's Treasury to support the scheme. That said, there is a great deal that the Department for the Economy can and should do. The motion refers to the need to provide immediate support for those areas and businesses —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: Yes, certainly.

Mr Stalford: The Member clearly stated that it was not his intention to score political points, and I absolutely accept that. Even a basic understanding of how the finances of this place work would demonstrate that that line in the motion — demanding that the Minister undertake action that the people who tabled the motion know that she cannot, even if she wanted to — is blatant point-scoring.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member.

As I said, hopefully, that support will continue. I do not want to see a reactionary process, but preparation is needed. Other measures, including circuit breakers, are coming down the road, and the Executive and the Department need to be prepared. We need shovel-ready schemes that can be rolled out quickly to act as a buffer for businesses that are somewhere between survival and failure. That is essential.

When questioned about the lack of economic recovery or challenged about progress to date, the Minister will point to a paper titled 'Rebuilding a stronger economy – the medium term recovery', which another Member referred to. I was pointed to it, as were a lot of other Members during the week, by the Minister. It has three key headlines: delivering higher paid jobs; delivering a highly skilled workforce; and delivering a more regionally balanced economy. Who could argue with any of those? They are key cornerstones of anything. However, they are not new. In 2011, new jobs, more skills and regional balance were the three key cornerstones. The 2016 Programme for Government included an exact copy and paste of that. Is this the paper that we are working off for economic development? It is a nine-page paper, and it looks like an A-level project. There is nothing in it. There are just phrases like "We want to get here" and "It would be nice if we could do this". I have looked at it, and there is no substance.

I have looked at the Scottish model. Its 'Economic Recovery Implementation Plan', is 60 pages long and was published as a secondary document. It covers the next 20 years and has everything in it: whether it be the social economy, SMEs or the third sector, it is all there.

Why are we so far behind? If you check the business plan in the Department for the Economy's COVID-19 response, you will see that it says that we will deliver a similar scheme by March 2021. I hope that I am wrong. I hope that my complaining will turn out to be futile because the plans are there, but it really worries me that we are so far down the line. The Department is looking to have a scheme by March 2021, a year on from when the lockdown began.

As I said, I hope that I am wrong. I really hope that the Economy Department and Minister have got this nailed and that I am standing here waxing lyrical for no reason, but I am terrified for the hundreds of thousands of jobs that we do not have plans in place to save. The document that we have is just words; there is no real structure behind it.

Mr Muir: I support the motion. The Alliance Party has consistently called for swift and strategic economic responses to the pandemic from Westminster and Stormont. Many of the actions taken to date are welcome. However, with COVID-19 restrictions likely to remain in place for some time, the Minister for the Economy should bring forward a detailed strategy on how best to support businesses through the highly turbulent winter period. What has been published to date, what is said to be a strategy, just does not cut the mustard. As John Stewart said, we need real actions, not warm words without meaning. Furthermore, the Finance Minister must continue efforts to obtain the necessary financial powers and flexibility to enable the largest possible economic intervention to support workers and businesses in Northern Ireland.

Since the start of March, Ministers and civil servants have worked tirelessly to respond to the unprecedented havoc caused by COVID-19. I commend them for their work during these very challenging times. That is not to say that we are uncritical of some aspects of the response. Indeed, as MLAs, it is our duty to speak out on behalf of constituents when Ministers and Departments fall short. The Alliance Party, my colleague Stewart Dickson in particular, will continue to champion the plight of those who are still excluded from receiving any support.

We also believe that it is unacceptable that Northern Ireland still does not have a Kickstart scheme, a full three months after it was announced by the Chancellor. In Great Britain, Kickstart is already operational, but, in Northern Ireland, we still do not know the details of how our scheme will work — just a hope, an aspiration, that it will start in November. Those are examples of where Ministers have been too slow or have failed to respond. To make sure that that does not happen again, the Minister for the Economy should take the actions outlined in the motion, focused first and foremost on an economic resilience strategy to get us through the winter and into the spring, when we may, hopefully, maybe, look towards a real recovery if a vaccine appears ready for roll-out.

5.30 pm

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member rightly points out the need for schemes that have been rolled out in the rest of United Kingdom to come here. That is essential, including the supported training and learning package that was rolled out last week for people who do not have A levels or their equivalent. Would the Member agree that it is important that we look at what Wales has done? Wales is in phase 3 of its economic resilience fund and has pumped £1.7 billion into its economy.

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

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention. Over the past months of the pandemic, I have looked to other parts of the United Kingdom and to the Republic of Ireland and the interventions that they have made, whether in Scotland, Wales or down South. I have seen with frustration and annoyance the measures that other devolved Administrations and the Republic of Ireland are bringing forward, yet we are stuck in a limbo in Northern Ireland where action is slow or not forthcoming. I agree with the Member that such actions should take place in Northern Ireland.

We know a lot more about COVID-19 than we did at the time of the outbreak at the beginning of the year. We have experience of economic interventions, and we know what restrictions look like and the impact that they have. We also know that the restrictions will continue well into 2021. Some sectors will not be able to trade normally while the restrictions remain in place. There are also sectors whose trading conditions will change dramatically as restrictions are altered in response to the public health situation, such as in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. Some sectors, such as the events sector, cannot trade at all. In that knowledge, an economic resilience strategy should outline how the Executive can support each of those sectors, whilst acknowledging that many of them have proved resilient to COVID-19 and are, in fact,

growing and recruiting. An economic resilience strategy would provide a small amount of much-needed clarity for business owners and employees and enable the focused and effective response required.

The motion calls for “a radical economic intervention programme”. We support such an intervention, but we are realistic about the resources available to the Executive. The Minister’s ability to act is limited by the block grant, the Barnett consequential received to date and Northern Ireland’s inability to borrow for revenue expenditure. Now is exactly the right time for the Executive to borrow to aid an economic intervention. I back the Minister of Finance in his efforts in lobbying the UK Government to that effect, whilst reiterating the need to ensure that every penny is spent wisely and no moneys are surrendered at the end of the financial year.

There is no doubt that this winter is set to be incredibly challenging for people across Northern Ireland, and the Executive must do everything that they can to provide the best support possible. We could not prepare for the summer disruption. That is not true of the winter, where the focus must be on safeguarding lives and livelihoods.

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and on the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the economy. Over the past seven months, we have seen severe impacts in our towns and city centres. Many businesses that closed for the first lockdown never reopened, and many of those that reopened have struggled to keep afloat. The latest restrictions in my constituency have come as a bitter blow to those who might have opened their doors for even a matter of days yet who have, effectively, been forced to close them.

I thank the Economy Minister for taking the opportunity on Friday — the earliest opportunity — to meet business leaders from the hospitality sector, the city centre and council. It was a productive meeting. Elected representatives would do well to speak to those business leaders, and some of them have not done so. They need to speak to them and hear their concerns. The business leaders said clearly to us that they see our Minister, Diane Dodds, as a strong advocate at the Executive table. They see her as someone who champions the sectors particularly affected. That was encouraging, and it is worth taking note of it.

That is not to say that there are not genuine concerns. There are, and the push at the minute to get additional support, particularly for my constituency, is one that I will advocate along with others. We face a very concerning situation, however. We could be looking at further local lockdowns across Northern Ireland. Whatever we do, we need to be mindful that interventions in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area may need to be replicated elsewhere. We have to bear that in mind. We will need to be strategic in how we issue our funds. We need to target support at where it is needed, particularly at those who are struggling significantly.

I welcome the medium-term recovery plan brought forward by the Minister in June, titled ‘Rebuilding a Stronger Economy’. The paper focuses on the next 12 to 18 months. It sets out a framework for decisive interventions that deliver higher-paying jobs, skilled and agile workforces and a more regionally balanced economy. The paper also highlights some of the challenges and the stark reality that we face,

which is that the decline in input in Northern Ireland is more severe than in the rest of the UK. Six years of labour market progress was undone in a month. The expectation is that redundancies will increase again sharply in the near future. Retail sales and forecasts are falling, and, of course, there are the risks and economic issues that surround the operation of the Northern Ireland protocol. Those are all concerns that we have to grapple with.

The motion states that we need another strategy. Some Members have compared the number of pages in strategies. With all due respect, the Economy Department has plenty of strategies, but we need to focus on delivery. I am confident that this Minister and this party are focused on delivery. Businesses and constituents want delivery, and that is what the Chamber needs to focus on.

On previous occasions during the pandemic, the Minister has rightly been focused on getting money out to businesses as quickly and efficiently as possible. We need to ensure, however, that, when it goes out, the money has the greatest and best possible economic impact, so that, when we come out of the pandemic, businesses are still there and are able to survive.

As we continue to grapple with the unpredictable nature of COVID-19, we need all Ministers to step up to the mark and deliver on their responsibilities. The SDLP talked about what the Executive had not done, but the SDLP is part of the Executive, so it must step up to the plate and make the issues known. All the parties in the Chamber need to come together and stop the party politicking. We need to stop coming into the Chamber simply to have a go while offering no solutions. People need to come forward with solutions, if they have them, and then make their approach known to the Executive. We need to come together on that point.

On a final note, the tone of the motion is, maybe, disappointing. All of us would do well to pull together and support the Minister in bringing forward the interventions needed to ensure that our communities are able to get through this in the best possible fashion.

Ms Dolan: Businesses and workers have faced a difficult few months. It has been only around seven months since the COVID-19 outbreak began, but it is apparent that the virus will have a devastating impact on economic activity here and, as a result, a detrimental impact on workers and their families. Projections that more than 100,000 people in the North could be unemployed by the end of 2020 fill me with deep concern. As must be the case for all MLAs, the majority of queries that come into my office are about the jobseeker’s element of universal credit. Surely, it is more efficient to support workers to stay in work than to put them through the hardship of being unemployed. Small businesses and microbusinesses and their workers are the backbone of our economy. This is not about pouring money into business accounts simply to pay bills; it is about protecting livelihoods and supporting workers and families. When I talk about supporting workers and families, I refer to more than just allocating financial support to those who become unemployed; I am also talking about those who remain employed but may be working from home and deserve the right to disconnect, the new mums who are returning from maternity leave, having been denied many classes and developmental opportunities for their babies because of COVID-19

closures and restrictions or those who have lost loved ones and require paid bereavement leave.

To have a fair recovery, we need to see fundamental changes to our labour market so that workers are truly valued and are afforded the necessary rights and entitlements to take on a new job or additional hours. The so-called new normal or “Build back better” cannot just be slogans; they must contain commitments to advance flexible working arrangements, as well as maternity and bereavement leave. We have heard about the bids that the Economy Minister made in relation to economic recovery, and there is certainly a need to have an economic recovery strategy that addresses the long-term structural issues in the local economy, including low productivity, by focusing on skills development and strengthening workers’ rights as well as the economic recovery from COVID-19. That is vital to avoid mass redundancies.

In June of this year, Sinn Féin published our economic recovery strategy, which is based on four key principles: supporting businesses; delivering on a just transition; giving the Executive the tools to aid recovery; and supporting workers and their families. As Sinn Féin’s spokesperson on workers’ rights, I will home in on that element of our strategy, which focuses on tackling the scourge of low pay and in-work poverty across the North. As Sinn Féin MLAs, we are committed to delivering on the New Decade, New Approach commitments, including the banning of zero-hours contracts and the Executive becoming a living wage employer. Any economic recovery cannot repeat the mistakes of the past, and it must provide decent and secure work.

The Minister’s economic recovery strategy cites the need to resolve low-paying jobs, yet her strategy only looks at improving productivity to do this. She has given no commitment or recognition to the need to end precarious work that results in low pay. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that the functioning of our society relies on the lowest-paid and least-valued workers. Lessons must be learned from that. The Minister has failed to recognise the importance of promoting and facilitating greater trade union membership and collective bargaining rights, both of which have been proven to lead to higher wages and greater productivity rights. Workers firmly need security and protection and must not be forced to choose between risking their health and risking their job.

Mr Stalford: The collective spirit of cooperation that clearly exists in our Government was being exposed there.

This time last year, no one had heard the word “COVID-19” or would have envisaged the damage that such a viral outbreak would have on our economy or generally on our society. The fact that we are looking at 100,000 job losses and the fact that almost a decade of job creation has been wiped out in a few months demonstrate to us the scale of the challenge that we face. It has become a cliché to use the word “unprecedented” about the situation that we are in, but these are unprecedented times.

From listening to Members, I think that it is important to get back to some first principles. Principle number one is that there is no such thing as “government money”. These are not government interventions; it is taxpayers’ money. If we are talking about making massive financial interventions in the economy, the only place that we can go to get that money is to the people of this country. No nation in

history has taxed itself or borrowed itself into prosperity. No, the way to secure prosperity is to expand and grow the economy.

I agree with some of what the previous Member said, particularly that our sense of what is a key worker has changed. I absolutely accept and agree with that, and I do not just say that because my wife works at B&M on the Cregagh Road. The notion of what a key front-line worker is absolutely has changed.

Going forward, I hope that the companies that provide those jobs — I have to say that I think that B&M is a very good employer — reflect that in how they treat their workers.

5.45 pm

As others have said, the interventions that have been made demonstrate the benefit of Northern Ireland’s being a part of the United Kingdom. The sheer scale of the economic intervention has been enormous. However, as I have said in previous debates on these types of issues, it will have to be paid back, just as it was at the end of Second World War. We finished paying that off five or six years ago.

I am mindful of the Eat Out to Help Out scheme. I said at the time —

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Certainly.

Dr Archibald: I am sure that the Member would accept that, in this phase, we should stimulate recovery and focus on stimuli to create jobs and tax income that will help to generate that recovery.

Mr Stalford: I do not disagree with that, although it does slightly have the logic of a man standing in a bucket, trying to lift himself up. However, that is a different issue. We do have to reflect on the fact that that money, once it is borrowed, will have to be paid back, and the way in which it will be paid back will be through taxation. As the Member says, the way to get more tax take is to expand the economy.

That brings me to the point. Sometimes, at the best of times, Stormont can feel as though it is in a parallel universe. When there are health debates in this Chamber, people lead the charge to lock down vast swathes of the economy and society and insist on almost going back to the situation that we had at the start of the crisis. Then, we have an economy debate, and some of those very same people who led the charge for the economy and general society to be locked down are those who criticise the Economy Minister and demand that she spend more money on economic stimuli and growth. One cannot stimulate a shut-down economy. It needs to be opened up. It is for those Members to square that circle.

Again, we are talking about planning for when the pandemic is over. When will it be over? Does anyone have a date? The criticism of the Minister is that she does not have a plan set in place for when the pandemic is over. Given the twists and turns that there have been over the past seven months, the Minister might not know what her financial position will be in seven weeks, or what resources she will have available.

That brings me to my concluding point. It is the easiest thing in the world to put down a motion that:

“calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Minister of Finance to bring forward a radical economic intervention programme that supports wages”.

There are no figures, no budget and no idea of what it will look like. It is just a bland:

“calls on the Minister for the Economy”.

There are five parties in the Executive. We could all do this, week in and week out. My colleagues and I could table motions that criticise Sinn Féin Ministers —

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

Mr Stalford: — or, indeed, the Minister for Infrastructure. We could all do that, or we could actually start to work together.

Ms Rogan: We can all honestly say that many, if not all, of our households have been affected by the impact of COVID-19. Whether it has meant working from home, shielding, isolating or being made redundant, workers and families are continually having to adjust to the ever-changing circumstances. Those workers and families are crying out for radical economic intervention that will make real and lasting improvements to their lives.

In June 2020, Sinn Féin published its own economic recovery strategy. We want to see support for workers and their families, the banning of zero-hours contracts and the Executive becoming a living-wage employer. We want to see support for alternative businesses, such as social enterprises and cooperatives. We want to see commitments to creating sustainable employment and high-quality jobs. We are also calling for additional support for the creation of new, indigenous, small and medium-sized enterprises, which make up 90% of the businesses across our economy.

The ending of long-standing regional imbalances and regional inequalities is also a priority. We want to see our local towns and villages being enabled to grow and prosper so that residents are not required to make long commutes and journeys to get to work. It is also an ideal time to grow our green economy and create additional well-paid employment. The further expansion of renewable energy can also help to lower costs for families and businesses.

Giving our Executive greater control of their financial resources is also essential. The transfer of fiscal powers is necessary in order for us to raise revenue and deliver a fair recovery that will meet the needs of people here.

The Minister's economic recovery strategy misses many of the key objectives. The Minister has made no bids and made no proposal for tackling regional inequalities through job creation or support. The lack of investor visits being scheduled by Invest NI in areas outside south Belfast is a major issue and one that needs to be addressed in order to deliver an inclusive recovery.

In the past, we have seen an over-reliance on Invest NI and foreign direct investment. In my constituency of South Down, Invest NI hosted no visits from potential investors in the three years from 2016 to 2019. In 2019 alone, 181

visits were hosted in south Belfast. The level of financial assistance offered in South Down was £10 million over three years, whereas, in 2019, in south Belfast alone, £26 million of assistance was offered. That proves that the Economy Ministers past and present are oblivious to the potential business development opportunities that exist outside south Belfast. While I express deep regret that the Minister for the Economy has not produced a COVID recovery strategy, it is not too late to introduce a radical economic intervention programme that can adequately support the many businesses and communities that have supported us.

I urge Members to support the motion and urge the Economy Minister to enact its objectives.

Mr Catney: When COVID hit at the start of the year, we did not know what impact it would have, we did not know how long the original lockdown would last, and we did not know the massive impact that it would have on all our lives. Still, the Executive, to their credit, acted. They moved quickly to put support mechanisms in place. There were grants, rates holidays, tax breaks, and, yes, because we had to act quickly, some people were missed, but, because we acted, we managed to help and support a lot of our workers.

We are at an important moment. The statistics are clear. We are rapidly heading towards, if not a period of total lockdown, a period of heavy restriction. Now is the time to act, now is the time to put plans in place, and now is the time to make sure that no one is left behind without support.

A lot of positive work was done, and I welcome the wage subsidy scheme, but the number of workers supported will become fewer and fewer. The Finance Minister and the Economy Minister cannot ignore the projections that show over 100,000 people being out of work by the end of this year. That is at least 12% of our workforce, and it will overwhelmingly be our young and older workers who will lose their jobs. Just saying “over 100,000 people” almost sanitises the impact of that statistic. These are our friends, our families, our children and our grandparents. They are the ones who have been out during the pandemic working hard, serving in our shops, stacking shelves and serving in our restaurants and bars. If we do not act, we will all have many personal stories of those who have lost their livelihoods because of this virus and our inaction.

We must also look at the wider context. We have record levels of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland. We have Brexit looming at the end of the year. I know that it takes a big decision to divert more funds to support schemes, but, if that is not in place, the signs are clear: there may not be an economy to support. Of course, we must try to get back to some sort of normality as soon as possible. That is how we can help the economy. It is therefore important that we all follow the guidelines. Those guidelines must be clear and direct, and they cannot be undermined by the Executive.

On a personal note, during the year my third grandchild was born. I have yet to see them in real life. I have not been able to hold them and to look into the eyes of that child, who is part of the next generation of a wonderful family. Through the breakdown of guidelines as the result of them being unclear, it seems likely that Christmas joy will go by without me seeing my grandchildren.

I know that that is only one story in a large book of stories about sacrifices that have been made. That is why it is so important that the Executive come out united and directly say to people that they should stay socially distant, wear face coverings indoors and follow the guidelines. I ask you to support the motion.

Dr Aiken: Thank you, everybody, for the debate so far. I have been impressed by the tone and tenor of the debate compared with some of the others that we have had recently. It is vital that we do this, because we are talking about our economy, which is the second most important thing in Northern Ireland, and about the position of our economy. We are also talking about how we can ensure, particularly for our SMEs, which represent 99% of our economy, that there will still be an SME ecosystem when we emerge from COVID at whatever stage.

I am sorry that Mr Stalford is not here, but I want to say this in the spirit of cooperation. We must all work together in order to create a business plan that enables us to come out of the end of this with some form of economy that has the ability to grow and to strengthen rapidly if it needs to, because our economy is going to contract. We have heard that it is going to contract by about 11·7%. That is an absolutely horrifying figure. We need to get it bouncing back not by 7% or by 10% but by 15%, 16% or whatever. That bounce back is going to come from the SME sector. It has the entrepreneurs, and they are the people who are going to be agile enough to be able to do something about this. They are the people that we should be concentrating on and helping.

A lot of the big companies are able to deal with this situation. They have chief executives. They have been able to get financing from banks and to do a variety of things that have enabled them to deal with this situation. However, those in the SME sector have watched their cash drain away and their ability to do things dissipate, and they are now in a situation where they are facing extinction. If they go, that is a part of the economy of Northern Ireland that is not going to come back.

We are in the situation where we have known about this for some time. We have known about this since March. Indeed, the Department for the Economy gave back, I think, about £53 million to the centre, quite rightly at the time, because it did not know how it was going to spend or allocate that money. That was money that came specifically for COVID in order to enable the economy to keep going. That was in March. It is now October.

As many of you in the Chamber will have heard me say, I will be one of the first people to lambast the Finance Minister at every available opportunity. Last week, the Minister of Finance allocated £37·9 million to the Department for the Economy. However, has he received any bids or longer-term bids to support the SME sector? Have any bids been put together for the allocation of the £53 million, which has been very clearly identified by the Minister of Finance as being available?

We also know that there are monitoring rounds. We probably expect come the end of the financial year, as normally happens, even in this period of COVID, that a substantial amount of resource will need to be allocated very quickly. The problem is that, in these circumstances, that money could be ensuring that our economic

ecosystem is capable of growing and could be getting the SME sector back up and running.

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: Certainly.

Mr Muir: Does the Member agree that, if we are surrendering resource funding at the end of the financial year that could have assisted businesses and people through this pandemic, that is nothing short of a scandal?

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

Dr Aiken: I agree with you. One of the things that we should be able to do by working cooperatively together, because we know that the SME sector needs support, is to look at putting together some form of plan that is able to support it. However, I hear words about strategy, business plans and words like that.

It sounds like management-speak. Our SMEs do not need that; they need the assurance of some form of financial support so that they will still be around in the next couple of months to regrow the economy. Quite frankly, Minister, they do not need another strategy or another business plan. They need somebody to tell them very clearly — that should be you, Minister — that we hear what they say and that we will give them the necessary finance to enable them to do that. Minister, you have the opportunity and the support of all the parties in the Assembly who will want to work with you, as well as the Finance Minister and other Ministers, to make that happen. We need to realise that there is a significant problem that we must do something about. It is not the time for more plans and strategies; it is the time for outcomes and actions.

6.00 pm

Gary Middleton quite rightly said that we have had plenty of strategies, and we need some deliverables. As an Assembly, let us commit to making those deliverables happen. Unless we do that for our SME sector, which is 99% of our economy, there will not be an economy for Northern Ireland.

As Mr Stalford pointed out, there is no question of raising a tax base on an economy that is growing because there will not be an economy to grow. We have to do something. Let us stop talking about it and get on with it, Minister, and let us do something now. We support the motion.

Ms Armstrong: When you get to this stage in a debate, you quite often find that what you wanted to say has already been said. However, I would like to add a little more.

As many Members said, COVID has really had a negative impact not only on the health of our community but on workers and the economy. Of course it has. This crisis is quite different from any previous crises. The impact of the lockdown has gone way beyond anyone's expected trade shocks. Much of the negative impact has been sector-specific. We have all heard from the manufacturing industry, the hospitality industry and the retail sector about the impacts that they have faced. Many of those businesses, thankfully, have availed themselves of financial support schemes to retain employees and keep their businesses afloat. However, as the Minister knows, some businesses and employers have not been able to

avail themselves of support. We need to let their voices be heard.

As a member of the Committee for Communities, I have been inundated — inundated — with calls from those businesses and businesspeople who feel that they have been left behind. They are banned from working. While the Minister for Communities has been successful in her business case to access further funds for the arts, as my colleague Andrew Muir mentioned, a number of businesses — in the events sector, for instance — are still banned from working and unable to generate an income.

Mr Aiken referred to one of my key speaking points for this evening. Many of those businesses are self-starters. They have been through the Go For It programme and have set up their own businesses — small enterprises — and even employed staff. However, many have fallen outside the remit of the UK Treasury's self-employed income support scheme. Those individuals feel abandoned. As reported in our local newspapers, one being 'The Irish News', one individual said that, if her business had been located in Scotland or Wales, she would have received hardship funds to support her through four difficult months. It is a difficult thing to read, especially given the fact that we are all here in government.

We need to get back to reality. Minister, it would be really useful to know, from your Department, how many businesses and the type of businesses that have not received financial support. With that detail, it would help us to identify exactly who they are and where they are. I expect that most of them are SMEs.

I would also like the Minister to confirm to the House what she and her Department plan to do to build trust again with a lot of those entrepreneurs. They were left out because they had started up their own business and perhaps, because they had not registered as their own employee, were outside the schemes. I do not know how we as a government will get those innovative businesses to come back, invest and grow in this place when they feel so let down. This place has not done that; it has happened because of COVID.

I would also like the Minister to confirm what support will be provided to the north-west, because it is not the only place that will have a local lockdown. What support will there be for other areas where localised COVID restrictions force businesses to stop or to reduce trading again? Those businesses were just starting back on the road, and the plug has been pulled. As Mr Middleton said, there are wonderful people and amazing Chambers of Commerce with amazing ideas, but getting hit with another mini-lockdown is impacting their health and well-being and causing people to lose their job.

While jobs and benefits —

Miss Woods: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: Yes.

Miss Woods: Does the Member agree that, if the Executive keep putting additional restrictions, which are understandable, on businesses and curtailing their opening and trading hours, affecting staff hours and wages, even before the aforementioned lockdown that may be coming up, they must provide further additional funds and support to make up for that, especially for the hospitality and event sector, for example?

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

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much.

Yes, I absolutely agree. Imagine that you are a singer who was employed by a pub. That is it — your income is gone. Then, you apply for universal credit, for which there is five-week wait, and, all of a sudden, your house is in danger because you cannot pay your mortgage.

While jobs and benefits are within the remit of the Communities Minister, I am keen to hear what joined-up working there has been between the Minister for the Economy and the Minister for Communities to ensure that the people being made redundant have the best possible opportunity to gain employment as soon as possible. I contacted a jobs and benefits office to ask the staff what direction they are giving to people and what types of new businesses they are telling them to go to for employment. I also asked what sort of information they were getting through from Economy, and they said that they were not getting any. I found that quite shocking. Can we have joined-up working? I am prepared to back you to the hilt, but we need a wee bit more. I know that we are all tired, and everybody is a bit grumpy. I do not know whether everybody has noticed that we have the October blues at the moment. We need to identify employment opportunities and ensure that the workforce is enabled to apply for those jobs. It is not just about training. There are 900 universal credit jobs coming up in Communities to enable people to apply for that. Lots of things are happening soon. I believe that we can use the Kickstart scheme and the apprenticeship scheme to get people into employment.

From catastrophe comes opportunity, and that can only be achieved together. I will support the motion, but that is not a negative move against you, Minister. I believe that we need to help you.

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

Ms Armstrong: We all need to come together to support you in the short, medium and long term.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I now call Rachel Woods, but, given her intervention, there is now only one minute left in this debate.

Miss Woods: Again, thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have very little time to speak, but that might be good for some Members.

I will go straight in. Mr Middleton referenced parties coming forward with ideas. OK, here are mine. We are not in the Executive, but I will put some ideas down on paper for you. We do not need to look too far for opportunities presenting themselves for job creation and for dealing with recession. We know that we need to deal with issues such as fuel poverty. Retrofitting houses is a perfect example of where the Executive should be investing. That is not all. What about a green new deal at a local level? What about investing in new infrastructure that will be required to manage a sustainable economy? What about buildings that have a low-carbon or zero-carbon footprint? Why are we still building houses that look like those built 20, 30, 40 and 50 years ago? We can create long-term, well-paid employment to deliver that programme in every constituency in Northern Ireland. We can reform finances

to make that possible, but that will require changes to banking. It will require cooperatives and community wealth building. I am glad to be the deputy chairperson of the all-party group that is chaired by Mr Catney.

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

Miss Woods: I look forward to that, but we will have a very big challenge on our hands. Members, I have a five-minute speech here, but I am more than happy to have a conversation with the Minister about our ideas. I will see you outside, Minister [*Laughter.*]

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank Members for their contributions today. The House is right to be concerned by the impact of COVID-19 on the economy: the projected spike in unemployment and the danger to businesses and workers from restrictions. I want to start by saying how proud I am of the resilience and innovation displayed by the business community in Northern Ireland. There are many examples of businesses adapting to the new conditions and acting as exemplars of how to operate during difficult times. I pay tribute to the local heroes who have kept Northern Ireland operating during the most difficult circumstances: those in the agri-food supply chain; those working in retail; those in construction and manufacturing; and, of course, our health workers.

Today, I read with interest the comments that Leo Varadkar made last night. Of course, he is right. Decisions that are taken by Administrations, whether, in Dublin, London or here in Belfast, need to consider the impact that they will have on the economy and people's lives. As I said in the House yesterday:

"The economy is not a nebulous term. It represents every job, every pay cheque, every bill and every dinner on the table." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 31, p135, col 2].

These decisions have never been, and can never be, framed as a binary choice between health and the economy. We will not defeat COVID-19 by destroying the economy. The ability to go to work, earn a wage, run a business and meet friends and family is integral to a functioning society and a healthy people. Decisions that we make now will not only have an immediate impact on the economy but long-lasting impacts that some sectors may never recover from and equally long-lasting impacts on poor health and poor outcomes for our families and communities.

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dodds: No, I have a lot to get through.

The last few months have seen the gradual reopening of the economy. However, for some areas, that is being reversed following health advice that has resulted in localised restrictions. The impact on confidence of speculation about "circuit breakers" or lockdowns cannot be underestimated. Whether it be business deferring investment, people cancelling hotel reservations, or the impact of the drop in footfall in our towns and cities, the cumulative effect is a severe blow to our economy.

I have consistently warned about the long-term impact that the first lockdown would have on our economy. Whilst we have witnessed some signs of recovery, I have been

clear that this would be undone by any further lockdowns, localised or national. The economic modelling of losing up to 100,000 jobs was, of course, predicated on no further lockdowns and only minimal restrictions. If we are now facing a cycle of localised or national lockdowns, that modelling will be at the more optimistic end of the spectrum. That is not a prospect to fill anyone in the House with any great joy.

At the beginning of the crisis, I moved quickly to support businesses across Northern Ireland through the grant schemes that were designed to protect jobs, prevent business closures and promote economic recovery. To date, we have issued over 31,000 payments to businesses through the three grant schemes, and that represents a total of £340 million of support for all sectors of our economy. We have established the tourism recovery steering group to develop plans and initiatives to help our tourism and hospitality sector back to its full potential. There have been national schemes that we have relied on extensively, particularly the job retention scheme and the self-employment support scheme.

As of 31 July, the combination of those two wage subsidy schemes had supported approximately 330,000 workers in Northern Ireland. Business support on that level is unprecedented, and we will continue to look for strategic and targeted interventions as we plot our way through a challenging time. I note with interest that, in today's debate, both Sinn Féin and the SDLP wanted to see a greater transfer of fiscal powers. Maybe they will be honest enough to say who will pay those extra taxes and where they will be levied.

The motion also proposes that the Assembly should express regret that I have not produced a COVID-19 recovery strategy. My, how we have got ourselves into an absolute twist over strategies today. The proposer of the motion makes a long list of strategies that he wants to see. John Stewart worked himself into a lather over more strategies that he could wave about in the air. Steve Aiken said that now is not the time for more strategies, and it is all management speak. It is absolutely the time for action, and that is what we have been doing.

I remind Members that significant support has been provided by my Department for workers and businesses across Northern Ireland.

I also stress that we are in a rapidly evolving situation, as was demonstrated by the further restrictions that were announced last week for the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. I met businesses in the north-west last Friday and heard about the impacts that the new restrictions would have on them. Those businesses want and need to be open and trading. A support package was discussed at Thursday's Executive meeting and again yesterday, and we hope to have a mechanism in place within days to support businesses that are impacted on. We will continue to work with our national Government on further support mechanisms. The replacement for the valuable job retention scheme falls far short of what I have been calling for. I also have grave concerns about how that scheme will work for sectors that are still trading at a very low level. Of course, the self-employment scheme, which is now at 20%, will have a real impact on those who are self-employed and face difficulties in earning a wage.

6.15 pm

We must, however, also start to look at the longer term for our economy and at how we can learn to coexist with the threat of COVID-19. As I mentioned, 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy' is a framework that sets out how we can build a more competitive, more inclusive and greener economy. It identifies key growth sectors that we need to promote, as well as the structural challenges that we will face in building a stronger economy. The proposer of the motion mentioned the need for greater connectivity across Northern Ireland, and I am glad to report excellent progress on Project Stratum, which will provide greater and faster broadband connectivity. Not only will it provide greater economic connectivity but it will level up the regions in Northern Ireland, because 97% of it is targeted at rural areas. I have secured £17.2 million to deliver schemes that include supporting the return, retention and achievement of apprentices. Yesterday, I announced 3,000 free training places for people whose employment has been disrupted by the pandemic. That skills investment of £4.6 million will be delivered by colleges and universities, with a focus on digital skills and women returners.

Nobody should underestimate the challenge ahead of us, but we must remember that decisions that are taken today will have a long-lasting and potentially crippling impact on certain key sectors of our economy. While we must, of course, be sensible and responsible in how we protect people across Northern Ireland, we must recognise that decisions must be taken following consideration of the impact on health and the economy. In finishing, I appeal to everyone to follow the clear message from the Executive — wash your hands, socially distance and wear a mask. We all have a duty to exercise our individual responsibility in order to keep our families and our communities safe and to control the spread of the virus. That way, we will have a healthier economy and better long-term prospects for Northern Ireland, and I know that you all want that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Matthew O'Toole to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for responding and thank Members from across the Chamber who contributed to what has been a very fulsome debate. I agree with Steve Aiken that it has been, generally speaking, of good tone and that it has been productive. I will try to reflect on and respond to as many arguments as I can.

First, I echo the sentiment in the motion and the words of my colleague Sinead McLaughlin, who highlighted the urgency of the situation and the profound difficulty in which our economy finds itself. Her words reflect the extreme and acute challenges presented by COVID-19, which, as we know, not only is not going away but is causing us to enter an even more difficult phase, a second wave. That has made inevitable and essential both a coherent short-term economic response and a coherent longer-term response, which is what our motion calls for today, including support for workers. I note — it is worth saying up front — that the Minister and Members from across the House are, broadly speaking, all in agreement that the furlough scheme should not come to an end in its current form in October. If something positive and unified can come out from today's debate, it is that all the parties in Northern Ireland and, indeed, parties in the House of Commons and other devolved Administrations are opposed to the

furlough scheme coming to an end prematurely at the end of October.

I will go through some of the points that were made in this very fulsome debate. My colleague Sinead McLaughlin talked about the disproportionate impact on microbusinesses. That is true. She talked about the four principles that my party set out earlier in the summer in relation to economic recovery; indeed, other parties talked about their own principles. Gemma Dolan talked about the principles that her party had set out, and that is exactly right. I suppose the point is that political parties are right to set out clear strategic goals. We have been clear about what our goals are for the Northern Ireland economy, and I am afraid that it is incumbent on the Economy Department to be slightly clearer about its goals and strategic aims for the local economy. It should not just be for political parties to put out papers and suggest things. That should be translated into clear action from the Department. Christopher Stalford and others are right: we are in a five-party Executive, but we are political parties. We are there to produce ideas that we want to see taken up by the Executive. There is nothing inappropriate about that.

Gordon Dunne talked about the substantial support that has come from the Treasury. I am an ex-Treasury official; I am under no illusions about the strengths or weaknesses of the UK Treasury. I could give you chapter and verse about the way in which that institution works. It has strengths and weaknesses. He also said that intervention must be strategic. We agree, and that is what today's motion calls for.

Caoimhe Archibald, the Chair of the Economy Committee, spoke in detail about the frustration that the furlough scheme was ending early. She also talked about the need to progress fiscal powers. That is something that I will come back to. I and my party strongly agree with that. Andrew Muir talked about it too. I will respond to something that the Minister said about fiscal powers. She asked Sinn Féin and the SDLP — I cannot speak for Sinn Féin — and those proposing greater fiscal devolution and more fiscal powers to specify what taxes they would raise. I have a deal for you, Minister: let us get the powers back here first, and then we will have a serious discussion about how we prioritise our public policy aims and deliver a reformed economy and reformed public services for the long term. The ex-Treasury official in me is happy to sit down and have a serious conversation about revenue-raising and about how we spend money.

I come back to another point that Christopher Stalford made about borrowing powers. Part of the suite of fiscal powers that you would want in this place is more fulsome borrowing powers. I do not want to have a "Economics 101" debate with my colleague from South Belfast, but he said that you cannot borrow your way out of economic difficulty. Tell that to the International Monetary Fund, which said yesterday that Governments around the world should borrow more to invest in their economies at a time like this. I am happy to give way.

Mr Stalford: What I actually said was that you cannot borrow your way into prosperity.

Mr O'Toole: Indeed. It is a fairly Jesuitical point —

Mr Stalford: No, it is not [*Laughter.*]

Mr O'Toole: — from the Member opposite, but I am happy to —.

Mr Stalford: I am a Presbyterian [*Laughter.*]

Mr O'Toole: Anyway, moving on, moving on.

John Stewart spoke powerfully about the need for this place to have a clear strategy. The point about having a clear strategy is not that you get bogged down in management-speak or that you waste time with papers; it is that you know what you are actually doing. You need to have a clear road map for how you recover your economy. As Kellie Armstrong said, in another devolved institution, they have had a clearer road map. I have read the document on economic recovery that was produced in June. You do not have time to read a lot of the documents that are put before the Assembly. Let us face it: not everyone in the Chamber went through every page of the monitoring rounds or the Supplementary Estimates, although I hope that most of us on the Finance Committee did. Not all of us go through every page of every document that is submitted. However, I went through every page of the economic recovery plan. It was only nine pages long [*Laughter.*] It did not take very long. That is not to be dismissive about the length of it, but we need clear goals, strategies and timelines. Any document that is a serious strategy is not descriptive, discursive and waffly, to be honest; it is about having clear goals. That is what we all want to see. This is not about political point-scoring.

Andrew Muir covered several of the points around fiscal devolution that I have talked about. He also talked about ExcludedNI and the work that he and others in the Chamber have done to support it. I know that he is a strong advocate of fiscal devolution, as we are.

Gary Middleton, who is still in the Chamber, said that we were politicking. I think that I have already answered that point. Yes, we are a five-party Executive. The whole point of having an Assembly is that five parties can come and debate.

Rachel Woods is the only non-Executive party Member here, but she did not get long to speak. If the five parties in the Executive are not allowed to critique or talk about economic policy-making, Rachel could have had the entire hour and a half. I am sure that she would have used it and had lots of things to say, but I do not think that we would want to give her the whole debate to herself. The idea that —

Miss Woods: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: Yes, I am certainly happy to give way.

Miss Woods: Thanks for the invitation to interrupt. Does the Member agree that, whilst we face great economic uncertainty in the face of COVID, we face bigger economic, societal and, indeed, existential challenges in the form of the climate crisis and that any long-term economic recovery plan or road map should adequately reflect that?

Mr O'Toole: Yes. I agree to the utmost with what the Member has just said. That is something that we collectively have to get completely serious about and deliver for our society. Yes, we are a small jurisdiction. Yes, our global impact on emissions is small. However, that is not in any way a practical or moral answer to the greatest challenge that this generation faces. It is not an

answer for young people, who, frankly, are frustrated with the inability of our institutions to act on climate change.

Christopher Stalford talked about not borrowing to deliver prosperity. We have talked about the IMF. Let me just come back to this point briefly. We are in an age now where COVID-19 has completely changed the rules of the game around fiscal and monetary policy. Governments around the world of whatever hue understand that conventional attitudes to sovereign debt have to change. I am afraid that we cannot have these tired old debates about spending money. We are not a sovereign Government in this place. We rely on money transfer from Westminster. We need them to be serious about not going back to austerity-era fiscal harshness.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: Very briefly, because I am running out of time.

Dr Aiken: I will just point out quickly that, when we could be getting rates at - 0.25%, now probably is the time to borrow.

Mr O'Toole: I completely agree with the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and Chair of the Finance Committee: now is exactly the time to borrow. We need to increase our fiscal powers and borrow here, because it has never been cheaper to do so, and we need to invest.

Emma Rogan also talked about fiscal powers. I hope that her colleague the Finance Minister is hearing this; I know that he agrees with it. We can get agreement in the Assembly behind the need for increased fiscal powers. She also talked about regional balance and a little bit about South Belfast. She, like me, is from South Down, so I have a slight conflict of interest here. However, we, in the SDLP, strongly agree on the need for greater regional balance, and, of course, I also believe very much in the city of Belfast.

I have just engaged with the Chair of the Finance Committee. He talked about SMEs being important, and, clearly, that is true. Rachel Woods did not get long to speak, but she made a very convincing point on climate change when she intervened a minute ago.

I welcome the fact that the Minister used her closing remarks to encourage everyone here to take seriously the message around social distancing. Finally, I reiterate to her that the purpose of the debate is not to score party-political points over her or her party but to demonstrate to her the extraordinary unity —

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

Mr O'Toole: — in the Assembly for a clear economic recovery plan to come from her Department in conjunction with the Finance Minister. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the profound impact of COVID-19 restrictions on workers and the economy; notes projections that more than 100,000 people in Northern Ireland could be unemployed by the end of 2020; further notes with regret that many businesses are excluded from current support schemes; notes

the positive impact of wage subsidy programmes as a critical lifeline to small businesses and those struggling to make ends meet; expresses regret that the Minister for the Economy has not produced a COVID-19 recovery strategy that provides support to workers and businesses asked to restrict their trading capacity; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Minister of Finance to bring forward a radical economic intervention programme that supports wages, creates pathways for those who have lost their jobs to re-enter the labour market, promotes new jobs and closes regional imbalances.

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

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Terminal Illness

Ms Armstrong: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the recommendation, in the Walter Rader 'Independent Review of the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) Assessment Process in Northern Ireland' report, that the six-month life expectancy criterion be removed from the terminal illness rule; notes the work of the all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness inquiry; recognises that there is significant evidence and support for reforming the six-month rule in all relevant welfare benefits among a wide range of local stakeholders; further welcomes the recent establishment of an Assembly all-party group on terminal illness; and calls on the Minister for Communities to bring forward immediately legislation to remove the six-month rule, provide guidance to health professionals and adopt a fairer definition of terminal illness.

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 speak will have five minutes.

Ms Armstrong: The motion that I have tabled is very difficult for me, so please forgive me if my voice shakes. It may also be difficult for some Members in the Chamber.

Terminal illness touches us through our friends, families and some who have had such a diagnosis. It is a shocking diagnosis for the person who receives the news, their loved ones and all who know them. It is also difficult for the people whose job is normally to save lives — the consultants and the doctors— to have to tell someone that their illness is terminal. It is emotionally draining.

Today, I ask the House to make life for people with a life-limiting condition a little easier. I believe that we have a Minister for Communities who gets it. I believe that we have an Assembly that gets it. I believe that, together, we can make life a little easier by taking forward a mitigation measure that will, once and for all, deal with a benefits process that is a cruel rule — it is hard to say that.

The current process confirms that people who are living with a terminal illness can apply for fast-track access to social security payments such as PIP, universal credit (UC), employment and support allowance (ESA) and attendance allowance under special rules for terminal illness. The current legal definition of terminal illness that is used to give you access to the fast-track application process is:

“a progressive disease and death in consequence of that disease can reasonably be expected within six months.”

To apply, the person must get a DS1500 form completed by their GP, consultant or specialist nurse in order to confirm their condition and treatment. That means that a consultant is confirming that you have six months or fewer left to live. That is tough and hard for any medical professional to predict. I feel that it is so finite. It is a bit

cold, and it is unnecessary. Imagine having to fill out a piece of paper telling someone that they have six months left to live. Imagine the impact that it has on the GP, consultant or specialist nurse to have to complete a piece of paper giving a timeline to a person who is fighting to stay with their family for as long as possible.

Many life-limiting or terminal illnesses cannot be predicted in numbers of months left to live. Marie Curie, which has been lobbying for a change to the special rules for terminal illness in social security law, confirms that quantitative evidence reinforces how difficult it is for medical professionals to provide accurate predictions of life expectancy for dying patients. A study of over 8,000 palliative care patients in 2006 found that accuracy varied from 23% to 78%. Imagine being the person who is terminally ill having to go their consultant to ask them to confirm how much time they have left so that they can get a benefit. Imagine, then, being turned down for the benefit because your doctor cannot accurately predict when you will die.

Why are we putting people through this? Is this the type of government that we want? We should be helping the person to live as full a life as possible rather than giving them red tape to deal with just to be able to access a social security benefit a little bit more quickly. The unfairness of this rule means that people are being turned away from being able to access social security benefits quickly because they are not close enough to death. At a time when they are more likely to be unable to work due to illness, are undergoing treatment and are worried about their family, we are subjecting them to the bureaucracy of the welfare system, and, Mr Speaker, like others in this Chamber, I know how convoluted and complicated the welfare system can be.

Many of us in the Chamber know how long the delays to access welfare benefits can be. People with life-limiting illnesses face severe financial pressures at a time when they cannot afford to. Being unable to work due to illness and constant hospital visits, parking costs, a carer having to leave their paid employment to look after you, needing to pay for adaptations to the home and having the heating on more often mean that being ill is not cheap. Indeed, Marie Curie confirmed that a terminal illness costs an additional £3,000 per patient per year. That means that social security support is a lifeline for terminally ill people and their family.

I am sure that others here today will be able to share the devastating impact that financial pressures and delays in accessing support have had on people with terminal illnesses, and they may risk losing their home and leaving mortgage arrears to their family. There is evidence in GB from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that, on average, almost 10 people have died every day since 2018 while waiting for their eligibility for PIP to be decided. We do not hold evidence for that in Northern Ireland, but I dread to imagine what the average figure might be.

Time is something that people who are terminally ill, sadly, do not have. If the legal definition of terminal illness was changed to move to a more clinical judgement instead of being a measurement of time left, it would open the fast-track social security access for people at a time when they need help. That is not something that is out of the blue. The Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 already exists. Through that, medical professionals use their clinical

judgement to determine when someone is terminally ill so that they can apply for benefits under the special rules for terminal illness. In Scotland, the definition for terminal illness is that:

"an individual is to be regarded as having a terminal illness for the purpose of determining entitlement to disability assistance if ... it is the clinical judgement of a registered medical practitioner that the individual has a progressive disease that can reasonably be expected to cause the individual's death."

Imagine the difference that makes. Instead of a consultant having to give someone a timeline for their death, they are helping the person to access financial support, which is one of the things that causes people with terminal illness the most stress.

For someone who is terminally ill, the application becomes a step in the process. As 60 clinicians, academics and other experts stated in an open letter, they must not continue to be subjected to the six-month rule as it:

"is unfair and denies people the best quality of life during the time they have left".

Walter Rader's independent review of PIP in 2018 also recommended that the six-month rule be replaced with the process used in Scotland. The all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness in Westminster's inquiry stated that the six-month rule is not fit for purpose. It too recommended the clinical judgement model. On the same day that the inquiry report was published in July 2019, the DUP, Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the Alliance Party, the Green Party and People Before Profit issued a joint call for reform of the six-month rule. The Assembly also has an all-party group on terminal illness.

On 8 July this year, Belfast High Court ruled that the difference in treatment for terminally ill welfare claimants who cannot reasonably meet the six-month life expectancy under the special rules is discriminatory. Mr Justice McAlinden described the difference in treatment as "manifestly without reasonable foundation".

Twenty-five health charities wrote to the Minister for Communities calling for the scrapping of the six-month rule. I know that the Minister for Communities is considering how to effect the process, and I know that she is committed to reviewing the welfare mitigations to ensure that we have the right mix of support to help people. I propose that scrapping the six-month rule is one measure that we can all support.

It is shameful that the Department for Work and Pensions has not changed the special rule for terminal illness or the legal definition of terminal illness, especially in the face of such overwhelming evidence. Until it does the honourable thing, it is up to us to take forward a devolved solution. It will cost money. It will be another draw on the limited amount of block grant that we receive, but I believe that it is a better Government who chooses to look after and invest in people when they need it the most. I ask the Minister for Communities to represent all of us in the Executive to change the legal definition of terminal illness, to scrap the six-month rule and to proceed with her intended bid for the money needed for us to cover the cost of fast-tracking people with life-limiting conditions until such times as Westminster sees sense. I trust our Minister for Communities to do the right thing. I trust every Member

and each party here to support her. I urge her to keep challenging the Department for Work and Pensions to fix the system and to mainstream better and fairer access to support for people who are terminally ill.

Finally, I pay tribute to all who have lobbied for this change. I pay tribute to the many families, to Craig Harrison and Marie Curie, to the 25 charities, to the 60 clinicians, academics and experts, and to all in the Chamber who will support the motion. Together, we can send a clear message from this place that we will bring forward legislation to remove the six-month rule. We will provide guidance to health professionals and adopt a fairer definition of terminal illness and unlock fast-tracked access to benefits. Thank you for your time. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Members who tabled this worthwhile motion. We on the DUP Benches will support it.

In Mrs Armstrong's opening remarks, she talked about this cruel rule. It certainly is very cruel and unnecessary. There are unnecessary assessments that bring added burden at a time of great concern, stress and anxiety; a time of not knowing what the future might look like; a time of increased spending, perhaps, and, for some, a reduction in income. For many, this will be the first time that they have encountered the welfare system and the minefield of completing an application for PIP and attendance allowance.

When I was working in the Ulster Hospital social work team, I used to be amazed at the number of people with a dementia diagnosis who had been living at home, alone or with family, who had never claimed a benefit in their life but had got to the stage of requiring private nursing home care. As part of my role in the social work team, I had to complete financial assessments. When we looked through the financial assessments for someone who was self-funding, we automatically looked to see if they were getting attendance allowance, but many people, especially those living with illnesses and diseases such as dementia, did not think of those things at the time.

6.45 pm

Kellie also mentioned the DS1500 and how cold and unnecessary it was. I remember that, around that time, I completed numerous DS1500s in my role. The forms were kept in a locked cupboard in the hospital social work team's room, and when you saw in the medical notes that the consultant had written, "Social worker needs to bring over a DS1500", it gave you a chill because you knew that someone was near the end of their life. I remember having to fill those in many times.

The Member said that it is cruel and unnecessary. I remember sitting with families and patients, telling them that I was applying for disability living allowance or attendance allowance on their behalf and needed to complete a form. Nine times out of 10, they said, "That's good. That's great. Thank you very much". The odd one asked, "Why is it only one page?" or "Why is it double-sided?" or "Why is it not that big booklet that you have?". Then, you had to explain that it was a DS1500 form for when special rules applied: it was for people whose life was limited. That put the people doing the work that I did in a really uncomfortable position. It also put the patients,

their families and the consultants in a really uncomfortable position.

At that time, we had ward rounds and ward meetings, where we discussed a patient's diagnosis and what their future was. It was very difficult for consultants to make the decision to say, "Yes, absolutely. We need to complete that application", because they were unable to see into the future. They did not know whether someone was going to live for six months or six years with their diagnosis, but we knew that that diagnosis, whatever it might have been, would cause that person life-limiting consequences.

Most of my personal experience is of dealing with that when working on the oncology ward. However, there were occasions when we worked on general medical wards where people had respiratory problems such as COPD, dementia, MND and other conditions that we knew would impact their lives straight away. They could not afford to wait for unnecessary assessments and the constant questioning as to why they required that money. It is cruel. It is difficult for practitioners to have those conversations. It is difficult for applicants to have that conversation knowing that they are applying under special rules, and it adds an awful lot more burden, impact, stress and strain to whatever their diagnosis might be.

I was reading through the information pack and, in particular, the Marie Curie report on the cost of dying. It is beneficial for anyone in a decision-making role, whether that be us as legislators or those who process the applications, to read the very real impact of a diagnosis of terminal illness. If, as an Assembly, we can do something to reduce that burden and stress, at the very least, we must. I support the motion.

Mr Gildernew: I support the motion. I acknowledge the work and the long campaign undertaken by Marie Curie, the Motor Neurone Disease Association and others.

I have experience, similar to Paula's, of working with families in this situation in my social work role. Often, I was struck by how many things were going on at any given time with families. They were trying to plan for what was a very difficult situation. They were trying to juggle their finances. Carers often ignored their own appointments and care needs. Sometimes, they could not get around to thinking about benefits and trying to navigate their way through that system.

It is true that many people do not want to know how long they have left. Anyway, the information can be so inaccurate that, as mentioned, it is meaningless in some cases. We all know of people who were told that they had a particular length of time to live: some did not live to see that time; others far outlived it. This is an area where we really could make a difference.

We have had recent debates in the Chamber on dementia and a number of other conditions. Largely, we speak with one voice on many of these very difficult issues. I know that the Minister will be looking at how we can change things here. It is not straightforward. I understand that Scotland has been looking at its approach, although it is not quite there yet. However, I am sure that we will take advantage of all the learning that comes from best practice, wherever that may be, and seek to apply it here. I welcome the fact that we have recently seen an all-party group being set up in the Assembly. Joanne Bunting has steered it, and I am privileged to be included as part of

it. It is an area that we need to give some really serious consideration to.

I also know that you, a Cheann Comhairle, have worked with Marie Curie on issues arising from that. The motion is in keeping with our party's policy, and I certainly support it.

Mr Catney: I also support this important motion. I cannot imagine the fear, despair and sadness that follows from a diagnosis of terminal illness. However, I have seen first-hand what a terminal illness can do to a person, how much support a person needs in that situation, and how quickly things can go from bad to terminal. That is why we must make access to support as simple, quick and easy as possible for anyone who finds themselves in that terrible situation.

I have a massive concern about how some of our benefits are assessed. Take PIP, for example. You have assessment criteria that force people with a life-threatening condition who have been doing their best to live their life, despite their health problems, and who have adapted to all the obstacles and challenges in ways that we cannot imagine, to throw all that out the window and focus on a world of inabilities. I know that we have to have assessment criteria, but it is the most degrading process.

It is the same feeling that I have about the six-month rule. How can it not sicken anyone here that we ask those who are faced with the despair of a diagnosis of terminal illness and who may be doing their best to live their life, despite the diagnosis, to prove that they will die within six months in order to access vital support? No compassionate society could think that that was OK. That is why I wholeheartedly welcome a move to the clinical judgement of our doctors. Such a move will also assist those with a more difficult medical diagnosis. We have all heard stories of the inability of benefit assessment criteria in general to deal with certain health conditions, so I hope that this brings some certainty and help to those in that situation.

The focus of our benefits system is all wrong. It should be about support to allow people to live their fullest life, to aid them to overcome barriers and to protect them from the challenges that the average person does not face. It should not cause a person to be degraded or to focus on what they cannot do. However, I know that that is a wider argument. To get rid of the six-month rule is a small technical change that could have a large impact.

As someone — I know that there are older Members — who is approaching 70, I think that life can throw most things at us. By the time that we are approaching 70, we have done that circle and have seen the joy and the sad parts of life, but to experience, or see a family member experience, a diagnosis of terminal illness, is something that you never get used to, no matter how long that you live. I ask the House to support the motion.

Mr Butler: I support the motion that was proposed by Kellie and Paula. I thank them both for it. I do not think that the tone of the debate will change. I think that they were right when they said that we have a Minister who is compassionate about these issues and who is people-centred. I want to record my thanks to all the community stakeholders and voluntary and community groups that have lobbied for years for these changes, and, in particular, Marie Curie, which has been relentless in pushing the message.

We will probably all talk about the findings of the Rader review. The review's report outlined 16 issues, but there is one that jumped out at all of us because of its personal nature and how it could affect the people around us and our constituents. I am going to talk briefly about something that my Lagan Valley colleague mentioned. We term this "welfare and benefits", but that is not what it is. I really want to see it changed to "social security" and for the whole tone of what we are debating to be one of how we support people when they need the help that is there.

Lots of us will have had experiences. My office dealt with a case last year that was very sad, and I know that Kellie was emotional when she shared something that was very personal to her. The case that came into my office last year was quite shocking. The DS1500 form had been used, and the clinician made a judgement that the person in question would live for 12 months, which meant that they fell foul of the rule. The reality was that the person lived for three months. We worked with them to go through the appeals process, and the claim was actioned retrospectively, but that is not good enough, because that person lived with that fight for that time. The discussions in and around the family of someone who is terminally ill are not the normal discussions that we have, because they are preparing for a funeral and a burial. Someone who is in a low-income home will be worrying about those things and asking, "How can I get buried?" and "Will I be leaving a debt that my family will have to live with?". This is 2020, and those conversations should not be happening.

I agree that DWP has failed on a number of issues, particularly on this one. If it had moved on the advice of the reports, we would not be having this discussion. I would welcome DWP listening in to this debate and making the necessary changes. I hope that we can act in Northern Ireland for the people whom we support. The PIP process has many failings but particularly this one, because time is a luxury for those who have a terminal diagnosis. With modern diagnostics, we know about comorbidities. There are increasing treatments and so on, making it even harder for our clinicians, increasing the burden on them to be tied down to a time. Clinicians are reluctant to give a time, because there is evidence that people live to the point of that diagnosis, when they could perhaps live longer, which is obviously what everybody wants to do. Time is precious and should be spent making memories. That is what should be concentrated on.

There has been some conversation about the scale of the problem in Northern Ireland, because we may not know how many people on the waiting list will be affected. According to the Marie Curie report, the financial burden is somewhere in the region of £3,000 to £3,300. There may be a benefit, however, because if we can support those people to live at home, perhaps we can ease the burden somewhere else. Perhaps we will free up a bed in the health system by moving somebody who can be cared for at home, which is where most people want to be, and be with their loved ones.

The purpose of the debate is to relieve the terminally ill and their families of that burden at the very time when they need it most. We need to try to ensure that, when people die, they do so with dignity. It is a job for our Minister to look to see what she can do, and it is up to us to support her in any way in which we can. We support the motion.

Mr Buckley: There are many days when I sit and listen to debates in this Chamber and think to myself, "What real relevance does this have to everyday people across the country?". I am sure that many Members can testify to that. Thankfully, today is not one of those days. I support the motion and thank the Member for Strangford and the Member for South Belfast for tabling it.

The current special rule for terminal illness in benefits law is cruel, lacks compassion and denies our most vulnerable and their families dignity in their final days. It is important that we highlight what access to social security payments looks like for patients under the special rules for a terminal illness. It means fast-tracked access to payments such as the personal independence payment, universal credit, employment and support allowance, and attendance allowance. Claims are, on average, processed more than six times faster than normal claims, which is crucial to anybody who is suffering from a terminal illness. Access to those payments is critical for the welfare of terminally ill people, allowing them to spend more time at home with those they love rather than having to attend face-to-face appointments and jump endless hurdles that are neither justified nor necessary.

7.00 pm

I think that we all agree with the merit of such access for those dealing with terminal illness. What we cannot agree to in this House are the key criteria to be able to access that benefit, that being, as was outlined, the legal definition of terminal illness used to determine eligibility for a special rules claim, which is:

"a progressive disease, and death in consequence of that disease can reasonably be expected within six months".

We can see the unjust nature of that rule, that being a six-month prognosis by a medical professional. It begs the question: what about the terminally ill patient or claimant with seven months to live, eight months, a year, or longer, or the terminally ill patient living with motor neurone disease, chronic heart failure or COPD, to name but a few, with a life expectancy —

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: Absolutely.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. I want to indicate my support for the motion, but I want to pick up on a word that the Member used. It is in the last line of the motion:

"adopt a fairer definition of terminal illness".

Is it not really the case that that definition of terminal illness and the six-month measurement rule are unjust, rather than unfair, and playing on that injustice strengthens the hand of the Assembly in arguing for a change in the definition?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Buckley: I wholly agree with the Member's comments. It is, indeed, unjust and unjustifiable, and I do not think that anybody here would say otherwise.

All those diseases, to name a few, have a life expectancy of 20 months or more from prognosis, with no treatment or

cure. There is no level playing field, and that is getting to the heart of what Mr Newton said. For those with terminal illness, we must address the injustice head-on without delay. I trust that the Minister will respond accordingly in the House today, and I have no doubt, given the comments from her colleagues, that she will.

The evidence is clearly there, as was outlined by the Rader 'Personal Independence Payment: An Independent Review of the Assessment Process' at recommendation 6:

"That the clinical judgment of a medical practitioner, indicating that the claimant has a terminal illness, should be sufficient to allow special rules to apply. The 6 months life expectancy criterion should be removed."

That is how clear it is. We also see the precedent for such change in the relevant Scottish legislation, where an amendment was lodged, and unanimously approved, to ensure that the definition was exactly that: based on clinical judgement.

I thank the Members who brought the motion and commend the work of the all-party group led by my colleague Ms Bunting in championing the needs of those suffering with terminal illness. I urge the House, and the Minister, to act with compassion, back the motion, and bring some help to those who, unfortunately and through no fault of their own, are dealing with circumstances that will have serious consequences for them and their families for generations. I also thank the teams at Marie Curie and other organisations that go above and beyond the call of duty. I think that everybody in the Chamber can testify to the work of those miracle nurses, who give of their time and are so emotionally involved in each case, whether following the patient through their illness or, as is evident, attending their funerals thereafter. They are so emotionally attached to their patients.

We must act with compassion. I commit to those suffering from terminal illness and those involved in their care: please be assured of my support, and my party's support, in the days ahead.

Mr McCann: I commend the proposers of the motion.

I make a special mention of thanks to Marie Curie and the Motor Neuron Disease Association. They are two wonderful organisations that provide an essential service for people who face life-ending illnesses and their families who find it difficult coming to terms with the imminent loss of a family member or close friend. *[Interruption.]* I have spoken to many people who told me that they would never have coped had it not been for the attentive and caring support that these organisations brought, on a daily basis, to their loved ones, from diagnosis through to palliative care. I also commend — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Fra. A wee second. Will Members check whether their mobile phones are on, please, and switch them off?

Mr McCann: It was probably mine, I do not know.

Mr Speaker: We will try to struggle through this, Fra. Gabh ar aghaidh, a chara.

Mr McCann: That is OK. I have struggled through worse, Chair.

I also commend their success in bringing together so many political parties to speak with one voice on this important

issue and their ongoing campaign to reform the rules governing fast-track access to social security benefits for people with terminal illness. Sinn Féin supports their view that the six-month rule, associated with prognosis, should be scrapped and a fairer definition, based on the judgement of medical professionals, introduced.

This issue was also brought to the fore recently by Lorraine Cox, who, supported by the Law Centre, took a High Court case to challenge the rule. We recognise that people with a terminal illness, who access an entitlement to social security under special rules, have a different experience from those who do not. It is much more than a necessity to have your application fast-tracked. Special rules apply to PIP, attendance allowance, universal credit and ESA. They not only ensure that your application is fast-tracked but they remove the requirements to attend work capability assessments or carry out work-related activity, the three-month qualifying period for PIP and the six-month qualifying period for attendance allowance, as well as face-to-face assessment.

It is wrong to restrict access to people who are terminally ill via the six-month rule. It adds unnecessary stress and worry, and it needs to change. The issue is both complex and extremely sensitive. It is difficult to accurately predict life expectancy, and some people may not want to know their prognosis. That should not impact on their ability to access financial support quickly and compassionately.

Removing the six-month rule and replacing it with a fairer definition is surely central to this. The special rules criteria, set by Britain's Department for Work and Pensions, are over 30 years old. Despite repeated calls from clinicians, academics and politicians across the sector and recommendations such as those of the all-party parliamentary group on terminal illness in Westminster, which is referred to in the motion and which found that the rules determining fast-track access to benefits for terminally ill people are not fit for purpose, MPs still have not made the necessary change. They have, however, initiated their own review, and we continue to await the outcome of that.

In the meantime, Scotland has brought forward legislation to remove the six-month criteria and bring forward a fairer definition. Scotland is to be commended for that. The motion calls on the Minister for Communities to bring forward legislation to do likewise. I am confident that the Minister will look at all the examples of best practice, as well what is what works specifically for the North, to ensure that people get the help that they need when they need it.

I welcome the establishment of the Assembly's all-party group on terminal illness. Colm Gildernew is Sinn Féin's representative. Only last year, at our ard-fheis, a motion was brought to the conference that supported the campaign of Marie Curie and the Motor Neuron Disease Association and called for the scrapping of the six-month rule and the introduction of a fairer definition based on the judgement of medical professionals. It also called on the British Government and the Department for Communities to address this issue —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr McCann: — as a matter of urgency to ensure that people with a terminal diagnosis do not have to face traumatic and unnecessary delays in assessing their entitlements. Also, my colleague Alec Maskey —.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to Ms Armstrong and Ms Bradley — Ms Bradshaw — for tabling the motion, and I declare that I am the chair of the APG on terminal illness. Ms Bradshaw, that is a common mistake.

On 8 July 2020, the High Court in Belfast ruled that the difference in treatment for terminally ill welfare claimants who cannot reasonably meet the six-month life expectancy criterion under the special rules is discriminatory. Mr Justice McAlinden described the difference in treatment as “manifestly without reasonable foundation”. All right-thinking people concur, certainly on an emotional and common sense level, even if they have not studied the legal arguments. If the question is about why things have to change, the answers are because of exclusion, time left to live and the best use of that time. We can all put ourselves and those we love in those shoes and think of the impact.

By using a definition of terminal illness that is tied to a life expectancy of six months or less, many legitimate claimants are excluded from applying for welfare support under the special rules for terminal illness. For many terminal illnesses, particularly non-cancer conditions like motor neurone disease, chronic heart failure and COPD, accurate prognoses can be difficult because of the unpredictable trajectories of those conditions. Ms Armstrong and Mr Butler have outlined the difficulties of variance in accuracy of life-expectancy estimates. The current system is only really working for patients with a predictable disease trajectory, such as some types of cancer. While cancer counts for less than a third of deaths every year in Northern Ireland, it represents 90% of the local PIP claims awarded under the special rules, and other condition types are significantly under-represented in special rules awards relative to the number of deaths that they account for.

It follows then that many people with these conditions are being turned away from the special rules system because of the unpredictable nature of their illnesses. Those who are excluded from the special rules have to apply for welfare support under the normal process, with all the bureaucracy and assessment that that entails, causing significant distress and robbing them of time that they should be spending making memories with their loved ones, getting their affairs in order and doing the things that they want to do before they die.

The significant delays associated with standard welfare applications may also mean terminally ill people spending the end of their life facing severe financial pressures. Two thirds of households affected by terminal illness experience financial strain, and, as Ms Armstrong pointed out, the extra costs have been calculated at around £3,300 per patient per year. In this context, the financial support provided by the social security system can be a godsend, but long delays to accessing welfare payments are compounding the financial difficulties. Time is a luxury that terminally ill people do not have. We have heard that evidence in GB shows that people are dying while waiting for their benefit payments because of the delays associated with the standard application process. It is bound to be a similar situation here in Northern Ireland, and we should do all that we can to rectify it.

Clinicians, Marie Curie in my constituency, with which I work closely, and other charities that assist the terminally ill are calling for a fairer definition of terminal illness that is based on clinical judgement, not a time-restricted estimation of life expectancy. That would follow the approach in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 wherein:

“an individual is to be regarded as having a terminal illness for the purpose of determining entitlement to disability assistance if ... it is the clinical judgement of a registered medical practitioner that the individual has a progressive disease that can reasonably be expected to cause the individual's death.”

Adopting that approach in Northern Ireland would allow more dying people to access welfare payments quickly. It would support people to have a better quality of life during the time that they have left and to avoid the long delays, intrusive assessments and work requirements that are associated with many benefits.

It is important to note that this policy change is not about widening the basic eligibility criteria for welfare payments. The overwhelming majority of dying claimants who are excluded from applying for benefits under the special rules for terminal illness will still be eligible for payments through the normal rules and, in many cases, these payments will be backdated to the beginning of their claim. The issue is one of time, ensuring that terminally ill people get the financial support that they are entitled to quickly and with as little distress and bureaucratic interference as possible.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I think that she raises a good point, because we have all talked about who is impacted by this failure in the system: carers, clinicians and families.

Does the Member agree that the assessors, who are much maligned at times, are doubly stressed and that that is compounded for them because they can see the need but know that it will not happen with this system?

7.15 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Bunting: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I fundamentally agree with the Member.

The other point is this: aside from the moral arguments, there are other potential benefits to changing the special rules system. First, money will be saved by cutting down on the number of unnecessary face-to-face assessments for dying people, and, secondly, by helping terminally ill people to access the financial support that they need when they need it, we can ensure that more patients are supported to stay at home comfortably, potentially reducing the avoidable use of public services.

Legislative reform is required to deliver this much-needed change. Attempting to widen access to special rules through changes to guidance, the DFC/Capita application or assessment processes will not fix the fundamental issue. As long as the six-month rule is enshrined in law, healthcare professionals will stick to it and dying claimants will continue to miss out.

Mr Harvey: I rise briefly to support the motion. I am glad to see it brought to the Floor. One of the most important recommendations to come out of the Walter Rader review

relates to the abolition of the six-month criterion placed on a terminal illness diagnosis.

A diagnosis of terminal illness impacts not just on an individual but on an entire family network. Few of us could even begin to imagine the impact that such news has on those who receive it and their families. People who find themselves in that situation should be afforded the opportunity to live out their final days free from financial worries. Access to PIP is one of the fundamental ways in which society can provide practical support to those most in need. Few are more needy than individuals who receive a diagnosis of terminal illness. However, under the current criteria, many terminally ill patients are unable to benefit from that help due to the six-month life expectancy rule. Surely, it is inhumane to place a life expectancy time frame on such a tragic situation, especially one as meagre as six months. It is important that the terminally ill are not denied support simply because they are likely to live longer than a stipulated period. As the motion states, “a fairer definition” is required that is sensitive to the needs of those who are living with a terminal illness. I trust that the Minister will move to reform the current legislative provisions and to support people and families living in such difficult circumstances.

Mr Speaker: I now call the Minister for Communities, Carál Ní Chuilín, to respond to the debate. The Minister will, of course, have 15 minutes in which to respond.

Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): I thank all the Members who spoke in the debate, and I thank Paula in advance of her winding-up speech.

It is an important motion for everyone. I do not know anyone who has not been impacted by cancer or does not know someone who has been impacted by terminal illness, be that family members, constituents or neighbours. It is debilitating even watching those people and their carers, let alone having to look after loved ones who are impacted by it. The issue is a priority for me. I give the House that assurance. I support the motion.

Not long ago, I met representatives from Marie Curie, the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Advice NI and the Law Centre. I have also spoken to families and medical practitioners about the issue. To say that their evidence and testimony were compelling is an understatement. As recently as yesterday, I spoke to a Minister from DWP about the matter. I assure the Assembly that my Department has been really proactive on the review and on what needs to happen. I also pay tribute to Marie Curie, the Motor Neurone Disease Association, the hospice and all the people who have been lobbying and campaigning for the change for years. More importantly, I pay tribute to the families, who have made it a rare issue that has united the House across the board. I also share the frustration that some articulated today that the review has not yet been published. To say that it is well overdue is an understatement.

A few Members mentioned the McAlinden case, and I do not want to avoid it in case people think that I am avoiding the issue. You will be aware that there was no remedy in that case as such, other than the judge's comments, which are very significant and important. I cannot go into what that potential remedy might be because the process is still listed in court and is still going through the court system, but it is clear to me, if evidence is needed, that our

Assembly and all the parties here are committed to helping the most vulnerable, and people who are terminally ill and dying are our most vulnerable.

The Assembly all-party group on terminal illness, which Joanne chairs, is also a welcome development, because it raises awareness of issues. We have heard them before. I remember that, in my days on the Health Committee, we heard about car-parking charges, the debt incurred by families and how neighbours clubbed together. When people are already on poverty lines, that is exacerbated when someone is dying or is terminally ill. It adds to the grief because you are worried about things, and, despite your best efforts, you cannot put your focus where it needs to be.

I am also acutely aware — you will all see this in your APG — of the role of hospices, social workers, family support workers and neighbourhood renewal workers. They are often the last people to whom a family talks about that two-page form. They are the ones who hold hands and try to cushion the family's shock when they are told that someone has six months or less to live. I have been in that situation as an MLA and as a daughter, and it is absolutely horrible.

The reference to Scotland has been really interesting. The Scottish model, as people refer to it, is based on a clinical judgement, but there is something that Scotland has not done, which I have been looking for, wishing for and hoping for. What is Scotland replacing the rule with? We are all looking at that.

We all know that this rule is not working — everyone who spoke said that — and where there is good practice and good recommendations, we all need to listen to them. I want to let you know that that is exactly what I am doing. Walter Rader's independent review of PIP — the assessment process — is sobering reading for anyone for many reasons, but, if anything, it asks us to work collectively to change the status quo.

The devolved social security legislation powers are now with us, so it is in my gift to look at this, and I am saying that I am actively looking at it. When we have found a remedy or are in the process of going through a remedy, I will inform my Executive colleagues, the Communities Committee and, in turn, the Assembly. It will mean that you will need to change legislation and regulations, but that is what we are here for, so I think that we are all up for that.

Some Members mentioned the assessment, and I want to put it on record that Deirdre Hargey had already started a process of bringing that assessment in-house, but people are doing the assessments, too. I think that most Members who spoke mentioned that. I thank Kellie for proposing the motion, and I thank Paula Bradley, Colm Gildernew, Pat Catney, Robbie Butler, Jonathan Buckley, Robin Newton, who made an intervention, Fra McCann, Joanne Bunting, Harry Harvey and, in advance, Paula Bradshaw. It is really important, because it would surprise you — I think that Jonathan made the point — that, often enough, not all your questions are relevant. I see that as a Minister, so I am just telling you that now, right?

Some questions, although they are in five parts, are the same. I have done that, too, so I understand. These things are absolutely relevant. People read our questions, debates and comments. This debate is important to anyone who has nursed someone or had to comfort

someone who was terminally ill. It is most important to those who have had to deliver to people the news that they need not apply because they have a year rather than six months to live. They will be encouraged when they hear what we have had to say. Let me repeat: I am completely committed to continuing to improve the process to make a real change. We are talking about end of life, and it is very difficult for people.

In particular, I want to thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. First, I thank the members of the Communities Committee — sorry, I am biased. I know from the previous Committee for Social Development — that is how far this issue goes back, as the Speaker is well aware — how wearying it can be to see the same lobbyists coming up and asking us to make a difference. Hopefully, today marks the start of looking at what we can do by way of a remedy and at what DWP will do. This will have an impact on budgets, but we knew that. All of us can proudly stand over this and argue the case for people. That is why we are here. We are here as legislators. We are here to make legislation and to make new laws. We are also here to make a difference. If we can, we must change this rule and give terminally ill people and their families a bit of hope. To be frank, they have all waited long enough. Along with all of you, I, as an MLA, a Minister and a member of the community am committed to changing that for them. That is why we are here.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. It has been a good experience. Hopefully, those who read Hansard will feel relieved, even if it is too late for them, for the many people who come behind them.

Mr Speaker: I call Paula Bradshaw to conclude on this debate. The Member has 10 minutes.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I do not think that I will need the full 10 minutes, but I want to reflect the breadth of issues raised this evening.

I start by thanking my party colleague Kellie Armstrong for suggesting the motion to our MLA group and for her work behind the scenes to get us to this stage today. She opened the debate by reflecting on how terminal illness affects all of us and how we have to recognise that what we are putting people through is cruel. She said that changing the law will have a cost but one that we will see as an investment at a time when people need us most.

Paula Bradley reflected on her experience of the DS1500 form. She spoke about how uncomfortable an experience the completion of that form was for everyone concerned.

Colm paid tribute to the work of Marie Currie, the Motor Neurone Disease Association and others. Jonathan, Fra, Robbie and many others commended them on their campaign for legislative reform.

Pat said that access to benefits should be as quick and easy as possible and that the current process is degrading and sickening.

Robbie said that we should be about helping people. He talked about his work with a constituent who was told that he had 12 months to live but lived for only three months. He spoke about that constituent's struggle for financial support in the last days of his life.

Jonathan Buckley made a very good opening contribution in which he said that the motion had great relevance. We

have all sat in the Chamber and talked about things that we feel are very repetitive. I very much concur with what he said. The motion and any legislative change would be about giving people dignity in their final days.

The intervention from Robin Newton was very appropriate in that he talked about how the rules are unjust as opposed to being unfair.

7.30 pm

Fra McCann said that changing the rules for fast-track applications would remove unnecessary hurdles. He also commended the work done in Scotland in bringing forward the changes.

Joanne Bunting mentioned the new all-party group on terminal illness; I am a member of that group along with others in the Chamber. We have so many all-party groups in the Assembly, but this was one that I was very keen to support Joanne in setting up. She talked about the High Court ruling and its use of the word “discriminatory”. We can all relate to that.

Harry Harvey spoke about people being able to live out their final days free from stress and how the current system is inhumane. People who are terminally ill should not be denied support just because they live longer than the six-month period.

Minister, I will turn to you. Thank you very much for your confirmation that you support the motion and your commitment to supporting your departmental officials to look at how to take it forward. You also recognised the hard work of the stakeholders, the voluntary sector and the families affected. You committed that, when you come up with a prescribed remedy, you will take it to the Executive for approval.

Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I will leave it there. I thank everybody in the Chamber for their contributions tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the recommendation, in the Walter Rader ‘Independent Review of the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) Assessment Process in Northern Ireland’ report, that the six-month life expectancy criterion be removed from the terminal illness rule; notes the work of the all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness inquiry; recognises that there is significant evidence and support for reforming the six-month rule in all relevant welfare benefits among a wide range of local stakeholders; further welcomes the recent establishment of an Assembly all-party group on terminal illness; and calls on the Minister for Communities to bring forward immediately legislation to remove the six-month rule, provide guidance to health professionals and adopt a fairer definition of terminal illness.

Mr Speaker: Members, please take your ease for a few moments.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]

Adjournment

Protecting the Knock Iveagh Historic and Archaeological Site

Mr Speaker: In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Mr Doug Beattie to raise the matter of protecting the Knock Iveagh historic and archaeological site. Owing to the location of the site, Members from the South Down constituency will be given priority, if they wish to speak in the debate. I will, of course, try to allow time for everyone who wishes to make a contribution. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will not take 15 minutes, I hope, but I will try to get the point across. At the end, I will explain why I have expanded Upper Bann into South Down so that Members can understand my rationale. This is my third Adjournment debate in three weeks. Each time, I cross my fingers that it will not be delayed. I guess that my luck ran out tonight. It is an important debate, nevertheless, given that we are talking about our historic heritage and the issues around that, and there are some issues. I thank the Minister for being here. I know how busy you are. We have corresponded on the issue, so it is nothing new to you. I am not here to try, in any shape or form, to apportion blame to anyone. What I am trying to do is discuss this so that we get an understanding of the issues with Knock Iveagh, just outside Rathfriland.

Knock Iveagh cairn sits on the summit of Knock Iveagh ridge. The cairn is a scheduled historic monument, pursuant to the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Some limited excavation of the site in the 1950s recorded it as being from the Neolithic period, between 4000 BC and 3000 BC. It was a burial site and an inauguration site for Irish kings in the medieval period: the Magennis family, I believe. It is a resource for understanding the Neolithic period, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age in Ireland. You will hear the historic environment division (HED) come up a bit in my speech. If you do not know, it is part of the Department for Communities. The HED said that the cairn was of national importance in understanding the Neolithic period in Ireland. Everybody is therefore quite clear that Knock Iveagh, just outside Rathfriland, is an extremely important historic site. That is pretty clear. Yet, despite it being a nationally important and scheduled site, permission was given for a wind turbine to be erected on it in 2013, about 100 metres from the cairn. That was done without an archaeological study or any engagement with the historic environment division. That should have happened as part of the planning process, but it did not. The division was cut out of that absolutely and completely. No environmental impact assessment (EIA) was done. In 2017, the Historic Monuments Council (HMC), which is a statutory adviser to the historic environment division — bear with me — wrote to DFI to ask for the planning permission to be revoked.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. You will forgive me for laughing, but, when you started to talk about prehistoric and medieval times, the honourable Member Mr Wells walked through the door [*Laughter.*] On a more serious point, I maybe did not pick this up, but can the Member elaborate on whether the decision on the wind turbine was taken under the old council structure or

under the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) structure?

Mr Beattie: I will probably get into that. Let us be absolutely clear: it was done under the old structure. It was when it was the Department of the Environment, not DFI. There have probably been a few other name changes. Everything that happened afterwards happened as we moved to the new structure, however. It is probably one of the reasons that I am here talking about it today, and I will elaborate on that slightly.

Therefore, it would be absolutely wrong of me to point the finger at any Minister and say, "You got this wrong". It is a long-term issue that we have to deal with. As I will explain at the end, Knock Iveagh is not alone. Thanks for that intervention, Johnny, but I have now lost my place.

[Interruption.]

[Laughter.] In 2017, the Historic Monuments Council advised DFI that the planning permission should be revoked. However, it was not. Since 2017, there has been further digging on the site. A further 2 kilometres of earthworks. An access road has been put on the site. A wind turbine and, I believe, a transmitting mast have been built, with a number of boxes that service the two of them. That has happened even though Knock Iveagh is a historic site of regional importance to Ireland as a whole and can help us to understand our history, from the Neolithic period to the Bronze Age and the medieval age. Our planning process seriously failed Knock Iveagh, to the stage that we have now built a wind turbine on top of the site. Instead of Knock Iveagh being somewhere that we can take our young people to look at, view and understand our history, what we have is a development that is destroying the site.

That is where the difficulty arises, because we are now caught between two Departments and a council. The planning permissions part of the DOE gave permission. I apologise if this sounds like a sort of planning seminar. Once part of the DOE had given permission for it to be placed there, and DFC's historic environment division had said, "No, it should not be", you would think that it would be really quite simple. All the historic environment division has to do is say, "No, you cannot do that", revoke the permission and take it away before it was ever erected, but nobody did. Nobody enforced anything. I guess that it is a failure by two Departments. It is not a deliberate failure, but it is a failure in the two Departments. We have been fighting for this ever since. If it was not for the Friends of Knock Iveagh — I know that a lot of Members will have engaged with the group, and with Anne Harper as part of it — this probably would not have come to light. It certainly would not have come to me. She has brought it to light and has been fighting a long campaign to have this decision reversed.

This is in South Down, not Upper Bann, so why am I interested? My interest comes in two forms, if I may. First, decisions like this are not unusual. The destruction of our heritage is not unusual. I just need to look at the rath and grange in Waringstown that were destroyed 20 years ago following a flawed planning application and permission. Although everyone has said that they got it wrong, nothing has been done to replace it. That is another example. Maybe people will not have heard of these sites. The Ballintaggart megalith in County Armagh, which is known locally as the giant grave, was lifted up, removed from the site and taken to the Ulster Museum, where it was set up.

When the museum wanted more space, it was removed and is now lying in a heap in storage somewhere. That is our heritage being lost. I have a genuine interest in our heritage — our Irish heritage. It is important; it is important to me. Therefore, we need to fix what we got wrong. It is as simple as that: fix what we got wrong.

I have another issue that I have informed the other Upper Bann MLAs about. If, at the end of this month, the Department for Infrastructure says that it is going to take enforcement action, there is likely to be a cost, and that cost will be to Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. Therefore, it will be a cost to my constituents. I have spoken to the planners at the council, and we could be talking about hundreds of thousands of pounds, if not millions.

It will be my constituents who will foot the bill. People say, "They will not really; the money will come from somewhere else". They will not foot the bill directly but may do so indirectly. That would be unfair.

7.45 pm

A mistake was made by the Department for Infrastructure, the then DOE, and it was compounded by the historical environment division in DFC. I am not blaming anybody; it happened, but it needs to be fixed. It could have been fixed, because DFI could have done so under section 75 of the planning regulations. They could have made them put it back to the way that it was, but they did not, and the situation has rolled on.

What is the debate about? It is about what should be important to us, which is understanding our history. We often talk about a shared history. If we go back to Neolithic times or to the Bronze Age or to medieval times, we were one people; that is our history, but it is being systematically destroyed. I am in no doubt whatsoever that Knock Iveagh should be returned to the way that it was. The bill for that should be picked up by those who made the mistake. Those Departments should pick up the bill and they should put it back to the way that it was. There should be no sleight of hand or telling tales, and no one should say that they cannot do it; they should just get it back to the way that it was. I am hoping that a report from the planners in ABC Council, which will come out at the end of this month, will make that recommendation.

I was due to meet the Minister on the site, because she has shown a real interest in the matter, but the weather was pretty awful and we did not manage it. I hope that she can apply some sort of pressure to make sure that we get the outcome that we want, because this is our shared history, shared heritage, on a shared site. Although it might be in County Down, it is as much mine as it is anybody else's.

Mr Speaker: Five Members are listed to speak in the debate, and they will have six minutes each, with an additional minute if there is an intervention. It is not compulsory to make an intervention or to take an extra minute.

Mr Wells: I thank the Member for Upper Bann for bringing the subject to the Chamber in the form of an Adjournment debate. It is a very important issue, and it is one that I have been involved in since its inception, in an area that I know very well.

For Members who may not be aware of the area, Knock Iveagh is a hill that is located just as you approach Rathfriland from the Banbridge area. It is a very prominent feature in the landscape, and, as we knew when the original application went in — and now know even more about as a result of the work of the Friends of Knock Iveagh — it is an extremely important historical site. In fact, the more research that is done, the more important it becomes.

We need to go back to 2013, when planning was the responsibility of the then Department of the Environment's Planning Service, and it made an absolutely fundamental error. I could understand the error if that Department had not made exactly the same mistake, a few years earlier, with Finnebrogue, which is an important historic demesne near Downpatrick. A planning application came in for a deer abattoir — known affectionately by the locals as Bambi Belsen. The abattoir was built in the area, and then, unfortunately, it was discovered that the Planning Service had not consulted the relevant branch of the then Department of the Environment to establish the historical context of the estate. So, it was approved, and then they discovered that they had made a fundamental mistake. Indeed, when the application went to a planning appeal, the planners noted the major gaffe that the Department had made. They were totally open about it and said that they forgot to consult that part of their Department, which would have recommended refusal.

In 2013, then, an identical situation arose. I have no doubt whatsoever that had proper procedure been followed, the application would have been refused, but it was not. Therefore, what is now on top of that hill, which makes it look more like an industrial site rather than a very important archaeological site, would not have happened.

I resent the fact that the ink was hardly dry on the permissions when the developer moved in to erect various structures on the hill. On top of that, a series of developments have occurred since, including a roadway, that do not have planning permission.

When the Department accepts that it has made a fundamental mistake, the council — Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon — should not have to pick up the bill for that; it should be the Department. This is where it gets difficult; the responsibility has moved from the Department of the Environment, which, of course, is now part of DAERA, to the Department for Communities. One of the reasons why the council has not been able to take action is that it realised that compensation would have to be paid or legal action would be taken if it took enforcement action. That puts it in a difficult position because that would come from ratepayers, and it was not responsible for the decision in the first place.

There is precedent for this: Ballynahone bog in south Londonderry is a major example of a raised bog. Planning approval was given about 25 years ago for peat extraction. Friends of the Earth took a judicial review against the then Department of the Environment's decision. That was successful, the decision was overturned and compensation was paid to the developer, which was Bulrush peat. Ballynahone bog, to this day, remains as it was centuries ago. We have to accept that doing that was expensive, but, equally, I see exactly the same parallel with Knock Iveagh. It is such an important archaeological site that the only way out of that particular difficulty that I see

is for Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon council to revoke planning permission and the Department for Communities to pay any form of compensation required. The site is simply far too important to allow that very unfortunate situation to continue.

I know that the Minister was due to come to the site because I received an invitation, although I was surprised to get one. I would have been there, but I then received a note to say that, because of the weather — it was appalling weather — the visit could not go ahead. However, I hope that, even after this debate, the Minister will herself appraise the site. Not too many people in north Belfast know where Knock Iveagh is, but I hope that there will be one more before Christmas.

The only thing that is driving what is going on in Knock Iveagh is the renewables obligation certificate (ROC) subsidies for turbine generation and payments for transmitters. We, as taxpayers, are paying for the destruction of Knock Iveagh. We, as an Assembly paying out that money through the ROC payments, have every right to take action to undo the damage. That development would not have occurred without those subsidies. I call on the Minister on this particularly special occasion. I know that revocation is a very blunt instrument and should be considered only as an absolute last resort, but, as the Member for Upper Bann has, quite rightly, pointed out, this is too important to allow the problem to fester any longer. Action has to be taken. I would like to think that, in a couple of years' time, you will drive past Knock Iveagh and think, "Isn't that wonderful? It has been restored to its natural context".

Ms Ennis: I thank Doug Beattie for bringing this Adjournment topic to the Assembly this evening, and I thank the Minister for her time. It is good that we have this collaborative approach across constituencies; there is a two-pronged approach to this issue involving South Down and Upper Bann, and we are trying to find a resolution. Unlike any other time, I am not happy to be speaking about this subject; I am filled with desperate sadness when I think about what has been allowed to happen at Knock Iveagh and the surrounding site.

Like Mr Beattie did, I convey a huge thank you to Friends of Knock Iveagh; Anne Harper, in particular; and the whole campaign group. They have worked tirelessly over the last number of years. It has been a real quest for them to right the wrongs at Knock Iveagh, to reverse the damage and to protect and preserve the site and surrounding landscape from further destruction. I have been only too happy to work with them over the last number of years. I have tried to help them in any way that I can, and I pledge to continue to do that.

Before I get into the specifics of the issues relating to Knock Iveagh, I want to make this point. I believe wholeheartedly that the thinking about and attitudes behind the shocking planning decisions relating to Knock Iveagh and to other decisions like this point to a massive collective problem that we have right across this island in our attitude to our history and heritage. We saw that demonstrated recently with the demolition of the home place of The O'Rahilly in Dublin and the Dublin Government's abject failure to protect the battlefield site around Moore Street. The historic, ritual and archaeological importance of these sites pales into

insignificance compared with their potential economic value, and therein lies the problem.

What has happened at Knock Iveagh is really nothing short of a disgrace. Knock Iveagh was the power hill of the tribal lords of the area of County Down for millennia. Leading experts now believe that it was the site of rituals, including the inauguration of the lords of Iveagh. It is also the location of an ancient burial cairn that is a scheduled monument protected by law. Investigations into Knock Iveagh and the surrounding areas show a series of linked sites of significant historical importance, each one a clue hidden in plain sight that leads to a deeper understanding of our local history and the history of the Magennis clan, as Doug Beattie pointed out. Archaeologists also believe that the lands at Knock Iveagh may well contain additional important structures.

Given the huge importance of Knock Iveagh and the surrounding sites and that it is a scheduled monument protected by law, it is unfathomable that any statutory body would give permission for any work at the site that would cause it to be damaged, but, unfortunately, that is the reality of what we are dealing with. Knock Iveagh hillside was damaged by the erection of a broadband mast that was built without planning permission or retrospective planning permission from ABC council. Minister, I acknowledge the role that your Department has subsequently played in ensuring that that unlawful mast was removed. In its refusal, the council stated:

“the development would have an adverse impact on the integrity of the monument’s setting which is a site of regional importance”.

Despite that, in 2013, the then DOE granted planning permission to erect a wind turbine more than twice the size of the broadband mast. How was that allowed to happen? Why did no one who was tasked with the protection of this site step in and stop the unlawful destruction of a scheduled monument?

Despite the multitude of failures at Knock Iveagh, it is still not too late to act. It is not good enough to simply say, “Let’s learn from this and move on”. Like Doug Beattie, I call for all those with responsibility to, to quote him, get it:

“back to the way that it was”.

Let us undo the mistakes that were made at Knock Iveagh, assess the damage that has already been caused and commit to protecting this and other sites for generations to come.

Ms S Bradley: I, too, thank the Member for Upper Bann for bringing this Adjournment topic to the House. We could not overstate the importance of this site. It is a Neolithic mound that predates the pyramids and Stonehenge. It may be less well known than Navan Fort, Newgrange or the Hill of Tara, but it is no less significant. The burial and inauguration site is of national importance. The associations with Magennis and the Magennis clan, which continue to be celebrated in Warrenpoint, are not lost on many.

It is a 5,000-year-old cairn. As referred to, it was subject to an archaeological dig in 1957 that revealed the hillside to be covered in layers of bone and ash. As also mentioned, the Friends of Knock Iveagh and, in particular Anne Harper, who I also met, so diligently revealed to all of

us further information from further investigations about the sensitivity and cultural significance of the site. It is our shared inheritance. It predates many of the divisions that ever existed on this land. We are right to all share a passion about its future.

It was disturbing to see some of the media reports that suggested that Departments, realising their error, made an absolutely deliberate decision to create another error rather than face up to the hardships of the first one. As Mr Wells said, that may well have been because of the financial impact of facing up to what went wrong.

Sadly, the story of Knock Iveagh now has a chapter in it from our generation of which we should be ashamed. We genuinely have to ask ourselves how that happened. I welcome the fact that the Minister for Communities has come to the House this evening, because we all have a shared responsibility with her in the defence of our heritage and archaeology.

8.00 pm

I do not lay the blame with anyone and will not spend the evening doing that. It is too critical an opportunity to ask what we can do about it. I could list Ministers, dates and events, and it is right to say that there are so many questions about how and why it happened. Processes, policies and procedures have been set aside on numerous occasions, which have layered the confusion and the impact of the devastation of what has happened on the site. I am on public record as being one of the objectors to the planning application for the retention of the mast on the site. Like many, my view is clear, and the harm that has been done there is clear for all to see. What I am less clear about is how it can be restored. Can it truly be restored in an archaeologically satisfactory way? Let us make no mistake about it: the damage has been done, but it is on us to find the best way to preserve it or fix what has happened for the generations to come.

Minister, I repeat one of your titles. It is an appropriate one, and I know that it is probably the one that has brought you here this evening. It is the defender of our heritage and archaeology. On that basis, I look forward to working with you and stepping forward as the House unites to find a resolution to the problem — the unforgivable problem — at Knock Iveagh.

Mr Muir: I thank Mr Beattie for securing the debate. I am the Alliance Party spokesperson on finance and infrastructure. I am also from North Down and know that there is a lot of constituency interest in the issue.

In Northern Ireland, we are blessed with a stunning natural environment and a great wealth of ancient historical sites. The landmarks around Knock Iveagh date back to the Neolithic period, and it is crucial that we seek to preserve and protect sites such as that.

I express my thanks to HED and other bodies for their work in preserving those sites. Much has been done, but there is much more to do. Those sites are all over Northern Ireland, and some are less well known. One of the sites that I have a particular interest in is beside the border at Kilnasaggart. A pillar stone there is reported to be the earliest historically dated inscribed stone in Ireland. It is right on the border, and it has been preserved. I once decided to visit it when I was coming up from Dublin. There was an electric fence around it, and I found out that it was

switched on *[Laughter]* but it was worth it because the history around those sites is fantastic, and the work that has been done in preserving them is to be appreciated. Not all of them are the same or are electrified in the same manner.

It is clear that the issues with the wind turbine and the mast at Knock Iveagh date back to 2012 or 2013 and that other concerns of the Friends of Knock Iveagh go back even further. It is also clear that the former Department of the Environment made mistakes with the original planning application and that, with subsequent developments, it is not an isolated incident. Since then, the Planning Act, which was implemented in 2015, has fundamentally changed the planning system in Northern Ireland. In the first instance, the power to determine local planning applications now resides with councils, and I declare that I am a former member of Ards and North Down Borough Council. I agree with Mr Beattie's point that, now that the power is with councils, asking Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council to rectify the situation and bear the financial cost of that would be unfair and burdensome. This is one example of the planning applications and duties that were transferred to councils, and, with the particular financial situation that councils face at the moment, it could just not take that cost.

The power for local planning applications should now be with local councils. That means that local representatives, who are accountable to local people and are armed with local knowledge, can make decisions in order to protect local sites of historical interest. The new system also includes a safeguard, whereby the Minister for Infrastructure can call in an application that is deemed to be regionally significant or otherwise.

I understand from colleagues on Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council that Knock Iveagh remains a live issue and that they are regularly contacted by campaigners, which is obviously why Mr Beattie brought the issue to the Chamber. In the first instance, and for the reasons that I have outlined, it should be for the council to provide clarity on this matter, with financial support as required. An application process that is still disputed more than eight years after the original decision serves nobody's interest. Sadly, it is all too common in Northern Ireland.

The Infrastructure Committee recently considered the terms of reference for a planned review of the Planning Act 2011. The review will seek to determine whether the Act meets its objectives. Our current system remains far too slow and ineffective, particularly when it comes to applications such as the one at Knock Iveagh. We must use the review as a genuine opportunity to make the system better.

It is crucial that we protect historic sites such as Knock Iveagh, and the Planning Act 2011 gives councils the power to do that. This must be on the basis of planning policy that also recognises the importance of our ancient heritage. Many people come to Northern Ireland, Ireland and the British Isles to see what we have to offer. These sites are one of our main offers. In the time ahead, we have to show that we are protecting them. If there are issues, such as those that occurred in the past, we must seek to rectify them. I remember visiting Newgrange a number of years ago, and I was probably the only person from the island of Ireland there. Everyone else was from countries across the world. Hopefully, one day, we can get

back to the situation where we can have visitors and we can protect these sites as one of the jewels in our crown.

Mr Speaker: I invite the Minister for Communities, Carál Ní Chuilín, to respond to the debate. Normally, the Minister has 10 minutes. However, because we are still at an early stage of the debate, she has additional time.

Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): Thank you, Doug, for securing this Adjournment debate. I also want to thank Jonathan Buckley, Jim Wells, Sinéad Ennis, Sinéad Bradley and Andrew Muir. Andrew's comment that it was worth being electrocuted to see Kilnasaggart will be recorded in Hansard for ever. I will also check Hansard for other comments that were made, just for accuracy.

I was not dragged here; I am happy to be at this debate. I will also be happy to visit Knock Iveagh when the weather is a bit better and I can see it. I do not mind getting caught up in or soaked by rain. That does not bother me, but I would like to see it.

The significance of the burial monument was mentioned by everyone who spoke this evening. I want to clarify that my Department legally protects the ancient burial cairn on Knock Iveagh hill. It does so under the scheduling provisions of the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995. That statutory designation recognises the regional and national significance of this historic and very important site. These legal protections have been in place since 1996, and the site was included in the sites and monuments record for a considerable time before that. There is history of Knock Iveagh in the Departments, let alone the community. As a result of those scheduling provisions, my Department undertakes regular inspections of the cairn, provides management advice to the site owner and must consent to any works affecting it.

From what everyone has said this evening, two main impacts have been the focus of recent attention at Knock Iveagh: an unauthorised broadband mast and a wind turbine. As a statutory planning consultee, my Department's historic environment division provided advice to the council's planning authority, and that led to the successful removal of the broadband mast from the hill. Related impacts on the top of the hill and the cairn setting have been repaired through planning enforcement. That is an example of what happens when we use our powers to best effect.

An intrusion into the scheduled area surrounding the cairn, where a shallow depth of sod and topsoil was removed, occurred at the time the broadband mast was erected. That has been resolved through a legally agreed scheduled monument consent process, commensurate with the level of impact involved in the breach.

The wind turbine and related planning matters are ongoing for consideration by ABC council, which is the planning authority in this case. Planning permission for this turbine was granted in 2013 by a former Department of the Environment, prior to the review of public administration (RPA) and the transfer of planning responsibilities to councils. To be fair to Doug, he clarified that at the start of the debate. Departmental archaeologists were not consulted when they should have been. That was a fundamental mistake.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ni Chuilín: Certainly.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that, had they been consulted, they would have made a very strong recommendation that the application be refused, and we would not be here tonight having this debate?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I imagine that that would have been the case, but I cannot say, retrospectively, that that would have been the decision. Given the way in which the division in my Department made sure that that wrong was put right, I imagine that they would have put up an argument, proactively and aggressively, for the historical importance of the site. I believe that, in this instance, the planning application was flawed. That is my opinion.

It is important to note that the wind turbine and associated works, regardless of how many metres away they are, are unsettling and have been a consistent concern. That is why we are looking at the impact of unsettling the cairn and that historical area. The council continues to consider requests to revoke planning permission for the turbine, to discontinue the use of land for wind-energy generation, and to remove the turbine development. For the past three years, departmental officials have provided substantial expert advice on the archaeological impacts of the turbine to inform consideration. I am not passing the buck — I am stating the obvious — but I do not have any legal powers with respect to discontinuing this or revoking planning permission. It is a planning matter, and any associated compensation is something that needs to be considered. I hear what people have said.

Mr Wells: The Minister was generous and gave way. Will she give way a second time?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Certainly.

Mr Wells: The Minister is absolutely correct: she does not have the power to revoke planning approval. She has, however, the power to consult Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon council to offer funding to enable it to pay any compensation that would be required in order to revoke.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I hear what the Member has said. I am saying that that is the planning authority, and we are still talking to it regarding the reconsideration of this application. I am not saying that it is not my responsibility and that it is ABC's. For the record, the Department has supported local government since the start of the pandemic, prior to it and will continue to support the councils afterwards.

The Member is well versed in conventions. The Valletta convention requires there to be statutory scheduling and protection undertaken by the Department on heritage and archaeological protections. It is unbelievable that we were not involved as a consultee.

What is DFC going to do? Without repeating what I have just said, my officials are playing a key role in addressing a number of issues at Knock Iveagh, as we say in north Belfast, or, as you say in south Down, Knock I-veagh. That says it all for me. The question is this: do I understand the importance? I absolutely do.

My officials will continue to monitor the situation there and ensure that the relevant statutory policy protections for the site are respected and, more importantly, upheld.

8.15 pm

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for giving way. The seriousness with which this archaeological vandalism has been allowed to happen on a site is probably hitting home for a lot of us. Mr Beattie mentioned a number of other sites that come to mind for Members, including the Giant's Grave, which is in my constituency. Again, that causes me concern. I realise that the Minister will not have the information to hand, but is it possible for her Department to look at where that site stands? We have been told by its champion, Richmount Rural Community Association, that its ancient artefacts and stones are now lingering in a museum, not even on display. Perhaps she can come back to me at a later point on that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member very cleverly weaved his constituency into my mention of two other constituencies. He has my commitment. My official, Iain Greenaway, whom I am sure many of you will know, is nodding, so we will come back to the Member on that. It is disgraceful that some of those artefacts are withering away in storage. I have always found it disturbing for that to be the case. What is more, the fact that the public are paying through the nose for that storage does not make any sense whatsoever.

We will continue to provide advice to ABC Council. As well as that, we will continue to ensure that, through the development of a local development plan process, there is appropriate protection for Knock Iveagh, its historic landscape and the setting around it, because the whole setting is important and should not be disturbed any more than it needs to be.

I will conclude by appealing to people, particularly those in ABC Council, as the planning authority, to read the Hansard report of this debate and ensure that our considerations are taken on board as much as possible. We all have a role to play in the preservation of a historic society, historic communities and, indeed, the artefacts that we need to protect and cherish for future generations.

I thank Doug and the other Members who spoke in the debate.

Mr Speaker: I thank everyone for their contributions and for the good conduct and substance of all those contributions.

Adjourned at 8.17 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 12 October 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Ms Rogan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the Adjournment debate last week, Mr Wells made an entirely inappropriate reference to the Nazi death camp at Belsen. How are you addressing that misplaced and offensive attempt at humour, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Last week, I was actually chairing the Adjournment debate when Mr Wells made what I thought to be inappropriate remarks. However, I was not sure about what I had heard and, therefore, did not want to raise it with the Member at the time. As soon as I left the Chamber, I checked with my officials whether I had heard what I thought that I had heard. We checked the Hansard report, and inappropriate remarks had been made. I immediately wrote to Mr Wells to advise him that he had made inappropriate and offensive remarks and to consider and reflect on his position. To be fair, he responded to me within the hour to withdraw the remarks and apologise for any offence caused. I took note of that. I further responded to Mr Wells that he should reflect on his remarks, and how he might further address the remarks if he wished to do so. I advised him that I had received a number of complaints from Members.

To answer your question directly, I wrote to Mr Wells and advised him that his remarks were offensive and inappropriate. I asked him to reflect on that, and he came back to me within an hour to withdraw the remarks and apologise. Again, as I said, I reminded him that he should not only consider and reflect on the remarks but ensure that that type of thing does not happen again.

Executive Committee Business

The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

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

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 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 of this statutory rule (SR) that was made on 15 September and came into operation on 29 September. The regulations have been made under the powers set out in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020, which was made at Westminster on 25 June. The Act includes amendments to insolvency legislation that applies in Northern Ireland, which was agreed by a legislative consent motion (LCM) that was passed by the Assembly on 2 June.

The Act includes a number of temporary modifications to insolvency legislation in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The modifications are aimed at assisting companies and mutual societies that may be in financial difficulties as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. These modifications were originally to expire on 30 September 2020. However, the Act allows my Department to extend the temporary measures if it is considered necessary.

The coronavirus pandemic has not been the isolated and short-term event that was envisaged when the Act was passed in July of this year. I consider it prudent, therefore, to extend three of these measures to provide continued support to local businesses. This statutory rule, therefore, extends two of the temporary modifications until 30 March 2021, and the third until 31 December 2020.

The main purpose of the Act is to create a new freestanding moratorium to give companies in financial difficulties a breathing space, free from creditor pressure, to explore options for rescue and recovery. The first provision to be extended provides for a relaxation of the eligibility conditions for companies entering such a moratorium. It also establishes a set of procedural rules for those who wish to enter or are currently in a moratorium. This measure will help companies that are struggling as a direct result of the pandemic to gain access to a moratorium that will give them protection from creditor action and improve their chances of recovery or rescue.

This temporary measure will be extended until 30 March 2021.

The second extension is about contractual arrangements with companies that have entered insolvency proceedings.

When a company enters an insolvency or restructuring procedure, suppliers of goods and services will often stop or threaten to stop supplying the company. The supply contract often gives them the right to do that, but it can jeopardise attempts to rescue the business. The Act introduces provisions to prevent suppliers from using contractual terms to jeopardise a rescue in that way. However, any losses that may arise from having to supply insolvent companies can be expected to have a more severe impact on the small supplier. Therefore the temporary measure that is being extended provides an exemption for smaller companies during the emergency. Providing temporary exemptions for small suppliers will enable them to make any necessary adjustments to their trading policy in order to avoid potential financial difficulties to their businesses. That temporary measure will also be extended until 30 March 2021.

Finally, the Act introduces measures to help struggling businesses by temporarily removing the threat of winding-up proceedings where the debt is due to the coronavirus pandemic. It also introduces temporary provisions to void statutory demands issued against companies during the emergency. That protection has given businesses the opportunity to reach realistic and fair agreements with all creditors.

The third and last extension is to the period in which the measures are to apply. Accordingly, petitions to have companies wound up cannot be presented where the statutory demand for payment of a debt was served between 1 March 2020 and 31 December 2020. Similarly, the prohibition on winding-up petitions being presented and winding-up orders being made, in cases where coronavirus has had an effect on the company's finances, will continue until 31 December 2020.

The extension of the modifications and the dates to which they have been extended correspond with what is being done in the rest of the United Kingdom. The regulations that you are being asked to approve have been agreed with the Economy Committee, and the Executive were advised prior to their being made.

The coronavirus pandemic has had a longer and deeper impact on the economy than had been predicted when the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act was passed in July of this year. I believe, therefore, that the extension of these temporary measures will provide continuing support and assistance to local businesses.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I will speak briefly to the motion as Chair of the Committee for the Economy. As the Minister indicated, the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 will assist companies affected by the coronavirus pandemic. On 29 September 2020, temporary extensions of certain modifications were made. A temporary exemption for small businesses, with regard to maintaining supplies to companies that have entered insolvency proceedings, for example, was extended until 30 March 2021.

The Committee considered the SL1 for the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 on 9 September 2020, and members were content with the policy direction. The Committee also agreed the statutory rule at its meeting on 23 September 2020, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. The rules came into operation in September 2020. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has no issue with the rules. On the Committee's behalf, I support the motion.

As the Sinn Féin spokesperson on the economy, I support the SR. It extends temporary provisions that were made earlier this year to give flexibility to businesses to ensure continuity of supplies and some protection from creditors and other proceedings, as outlined by the Minister. As the Minister said, the impact of COVID-19 on our businesses continues to be grave, and it is likely that those impacts will continue and, potentially, worsen. Therefore I am supportive of these measures.

12.15 pm

Mr Stalford: I welcome the Minister's statement and affirm the Democratic Unionist Party's support for these measures.

I do not think that any of us could have envisaged in July, when these measures were first put in place, that we would now look to extend them well into another year. That, unfortunately, is the situation in which we find ourselves. The Minister has shown leadership in ensuring that the measures are brought forward and that a tailored solution can be delivered to help businesses through this very difficult time.

It is likely that we will have a very long, deep and hard winter in economic terms. Anything, therefore, that the Department or we as an organ of government can do to help the business sector get through this difficult time should be done. In that vein, we support the measures.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. These measures are meant to assist companies and provide them with greater flexibility. Each of us has listened to the news reports over the weekend, and, as my colleague said, it is likely to be a long, tough winter for businesses and jobs in Northern Ireland. These are just some of the measures that we can take to alleviate difficult positions. I thank the House for its support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

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

Mr Speaker: Members should take their ease for a moment or two while we change the arrangements at the Table.

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

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is a motion to approve a statutory rule.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

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

Mr Swann: The amendment regulations before the Assembly today placed additional restrictions upon gatherings at private homes within a defined period, which is referred to as the emergency period, and within a defined geography, which is referred to as the protected area. As Members will recall, on 10 September, the restrictions were initially introduced solely for Belfast and specific postcodes in the Ballymena, Glenavy, Lisburn and Crumlin areas, and BT60 was added on 18 September. Subsequently, from 21 September, they have been applied across Northern Ireland and remain in place.

The restrictions imposed by the regulations relate solely to the domestic sphere. They limit social interaction in homes and gardens, with the intention of preventing the spread of coronavirus. Principally, the regulations state that, in respect of the protected area, no one may participate in a gathering indoors in a private dwelling that consists of persons from more than one household, and no one may participate in a gathering outdoors at a private dwelling that consists of more than six persons or consists of persons from more than two households.

A number of important exemptions apply to allow gatherings to take place outside those limits in a number of specific circumstances. Those are where all the people in the gathering are members of a bubble — the regulation provides the definition of bubbling — or where people are gathering for one of these specific purposes: childcare; building or maintenance works; the provision of a trade or profession at the home; the provision of care or assistance to a vulnerable person; giving or receiving legal advice or assistance or fulfilling a legal obligation; the provision of emergency or medical assistance to any person; a marriage or a civil partnership where one of the couple is terminally ill; a funeral or an event associated with a funeral; or a house move.

At the same time, advice was given to those living in the affected areas to avoid unnecessary travel outside the protected areas. Care homes and hospitals in those areas were advised to significantly curtail visits as soon as was practicable so that one member of a family is permitted to visit once a week while the restrictions apply. Medically vulnerable and older people living in those areas have also been asked to be particularly careful in following the advice on limiting household contact, social distancing, handwashing and wearing a face covering, given the local levels of COVID-19. The regulations place a significant imposition upon individuals and families, preventing them from socialising at home.

The Executive do not take these measures or any measure like them lightly, but the regulations are made for the purpose of preventing greater harm through the spread of the virus and the sickness and death of others. The deterioration of the situation since 10 September has meant that the localised restrictions have now been applied across all of Northern Ireland, and even further restrictions, commencing a week ago, have been brought to bear in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. This is the current direction of travel, reflecting the increased levels of infection and the increased risks to health.

At this point, I would like to read a number of things into the record. I alert Members to the fact that the average number of new positive tests per day over the last seven days has increased from 241·4 to 518·6 — a doubling. The seven-day incidence, based on new positive cases per 100,000, is up from 88·9 to 191·1 — again, a doubling. Seven days ago, the seven-day average of the total number of positive tests across both pillars was 4·1%. In the last R paper, it was 8·94% — more than a doubling. The number of new positive tests among the over-60s in the last seven days is up from 189 to 420. COVID-positive hospital admissions in the last week are up from 43 to 77. The seven-day average number of COVID-occupied hospital beds is up from 44·7 to 76·1. The number of inpatients with community-acquired COVID is up from 51 to over 130 today.

There has been commentary in the public domain, but I firmly believe that decisions that are taken by the Executive should be dealt with in the Executive and not in the media. I inform the House that I provided the First Minister and the deputy First Minister with detailed recommendations on where Department of Health decisions should be taken. I confirm that I submitted a paper yesterday evening to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister spelling out the detailed advice from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA). That paper recommends that decisive action should be taken urgently in order to save lives, prevent the health service being overwhelmed and protect non-COVID services to the greatest extent possible.

We all in the House realise that the issues are complex and that we need to take into account a number of perspectives and implications. The role of our Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser is to provide advice from the health perspective. Other sectors will, quite properly, have additional issues and concerns. It is, ultimately, for the Executive to consider all factors together. It is not, nor would it be, helpful to focus on any of those perspectives in isolation. I will continue to respect the Executive by not making public the guidance that we give to them before they have had time to discuss it.

The purpose of the motion is to allow Members to examine the terms of this set of regulations and to debate their merits. I welcome the opportunity to address those issues in the Chamber, and I look forward to colleagues' contributions.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, it was rightly and accurately pointed out that, in a previous debate on coronavirus regulations, 85% of the 10 minutes that the junior Minister had to speak was used to discuss stuff that was not related to the measures that he was announcing. Similarly, the Minister went a wee

bit further than just these measures. Therefore, I will show some leeway to Members because, if a Minister expands on a theme, it is only fair that Members should be allowed to as well.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I want to start by reflecting on the very grave situation that the Minister outlined on the number of cases and the doubling of some of the key metrics at a rate that is of significant concern. I give my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one since the start of this as a result of COVID-19, and our thoughts are with those who have tested positive in recent times, given all the anxiety, stress and difficulty that that brings to them and their family.

I thank the Minister, his officials and the wider health and social care workforce for their relentless work on our behalf to tackle the pandemic, keep us safe and protect our health service and the vast array of services that are delivered daily without fanfare. As outlined by the Minister, these regulations put in place the enhanced restrictions that initially applied to a limited number of areas that were defined by postcode and that have since been extended.

While it is acutely aware of the need for effective measures in order to curb the rising infection rates, the Health Committee found these regulations challenging and considered them on two occasions before coming to a view. While we agreed to lend our support today, the Committee also agreed that I should put on record a number of concerns. The first challenge was access to the evidence, modelling and advice behind these and other coronavirus regulations. Whenever regulations come before the Executive, Ministers weigh up the merits of the proposals based on advice from senior departmental officials, who, we are advised, trawl a range of scientific papers and present a summary indicating the rationale and, presumably, modelling, anticipated costs and impact of the measures.

The Health Committee, on the other hand, has been asked to come to its view without access to that critical information. That is all the more important, given the haste with which some measures are having to be put in place, with no time for consultation. Despite challenging the adequacy of the information that was provided on a series of regulations, officials could not advise whether the Committee's request for access to relevant papers has been relayed to the Executive. The Health Committee believes that it should be equipped with all relevant information so that it can perform its statutory duty to scrutinise the legislation that comes before it.

For the avoidance of doubt, I say that that scrutiny allows us to play a role in assessing what measures have had an impact and what lessons can be learned for the future. We are not undermining the fact that many of the restrictions are necessary; we are saying that we want to be able to learn and to implement the lessons as a result of having good evidence and applying our scrutiny function. Moreover, in view of the impact that the regulations have on people's lives, there are benefits to be gained in being as transparent as possible about the underpinning analysis on which the regulations are based in terms of securing and maintaining all-important public buy-in at this undoubtedly difficult time.

12.30 pm

The second challenge for the Committee is that the regulations provide that subsequent changes to the list of postcodes covered could be done by direction. As Members know, that means that there is no Assembly or Committee oversight; indeed, the directions listing new postcodes were placed on a website and not even copied to the Committee. The Committee might have had less concern if the directions were making minor technical arrangements, but they have a significant impact on people's families and lives. I want to be clear that the issue is not the merits of the enhanced restrictions or their legal validity but how reasonable it is to extend significant legal obligations to different communities by simple ministerial decision without any possibility of the Committee or, indeed, the House asking questions or taking a view. Again, that must be considered in the light of my earlier point about access to departmental analysis.

The Committee would want me to stress, I am sure, our understanding of the need to be agile in such difficult circumstances, but the question is whether this is the right balance between agility and scrutiny. Further to discussion, we remain uncertain that laying new SRs to adjust the restrictions, as has been the case in dealing with all other restrictions, would be unworkable. The Committee has asked the Department to look again at that approach and to use directions only where absolutely essential. I note that the increased restrictions in Derry and Strabane were brought in by statutory regulation, and, on behalf of the Committee, I welcome that approach, which is sounder.

The Committee sought and received an assurance from officials on the communication of future directions.

Considering the rules on linked households or "bubbles", the Committee discussed with the Examiner of Statutory Rules the necessity and proportionality of prohibiting a household from forming a new bubble with a second household, should a first bubble break down. While members recognised that the exemption would be open to abuse if there were no restrictions, we asked officials to consider the merits of amending the legislation to enable a new bubble to be formed after a safe time had elapsed.

Helpfully, officials reminded the Committee that, in addition to linked households, a further exemption existed to allow a vulnerable person to receive care and support in their home. They further pointed out that a "vulnerable person" was deliberately undefined, to allow for reasonable interpretation.

A member suggested rightly that isolation, as distinct from pure caring needs, should be further considered in terms of the exemptions and current limits to forming linked households. The Chief Environmental Health Officer again offered to give that issue further thought.

The Committee discussed with officials the growing body of evidence regarding transmission of the virus. The Chief Scientific Adviser told us that, whereas it initially seemed that the majority of infections resulted from household transmission, at present, the largest volume of cases appeared to occur through community transmission. He explained that "community transmission" was a broad category, comprising a range of settings, including sports and hospitality but not workplaces. The Committee has requested a further breakdown of the evidence on

transmission, although we understand that it is often impossible to be categorical about where the virus was acquired. We will discuss the information gleaned through contact tracing with the Public Health Agency this week.

I reiterate the Committee's unwavering commitment to working constructively with the Minister and our solidarity with all those working to provide leadership and clear public messaging at this critical time. I again encourage everyone to stay informed, to reduce their social contacts, where possible, and to continue to observe the basic precautions of washing hands and social distancing.

In my role as Sinn Féin health spokesperson, I reiterate that there is a large body of worrying evidence on the spread of coronavirus and its potential and actual impact on the health service. We know that, in normal years, our health service operates very tight to capacity at times over the winter. We now have the additional element of COVID impacting on admissions and, critically, hospital staffing levels, which will face challenges. We also see an increase in the virus in care home settings. Many of our health services have limited capacity and must be protected. We all recognise the need to protect all the other services, and the Minister has acknowledged that he is working hard to do that. On behalf of the Committee and my party, I indicate support for the regulations.

Mrs Cameron: I also put on record my condolences to the families of those who have lost their life in recent days. Unfortunately, that will continue as time goes on.

The regulations represent another attempt to get ahead of the virus and control the spread amongst our community. In recent days, we have seen the number of new positive cases rise to over 1,000 a day. That is a worrying trend. It reminds us all how the virus transmits so quickly. It should serve as a daily warning alert to follow guidance, and that is what we have to do. We need to do the right thing.

We were told that much of the transmission was happening in households, and hence the regulations before us today were adopted. We all struggle with the restrictions on letting people into our home. The Ulster people are hospitable people. It is against our nature to let people stand at the door and not bring them in and offer them a cup of tea and a chat, yet it is just that sort of natural daily occurrence that, we are told, spreads COVID, so we have to say no. I welcome the bubbling concept. It is especially good for those who are single and live on their own, for whom recent months have been a lonely and difficult time. It is vital that particularly those who have care needs can bubble with one other household. Bubbling is to be welcomed.

The regulations also concern business. Who amongst us has not been inundated with calls and emails from businesses that are quite simply fighting to keep their doors open? It is a deeply worrying time. The latest note of caution sounded by my colleague the Economy Minister should serve as a warning to us that restricting businesses must be a measure of last resort. Of course, it goes without saying that lives need protecting, but we must learn to do that while protecting livelihoods. How do we expect businesses to survive? How do we expect employers to keep paying employees when the cash simply is not in the takings? To be blunt, how can we expect the Government to keep picking up the tab?

We need to learn to live with COVID by protecting people's health but also by protecting society, jobs and family incomes. We need a balance. Each of us, individually, has the power to provide that balance. Key to finding a balance is driving home the key messages: wash your hands; wear a face covering; socially distance; and, if you have symptoms, self-isolate and book a test. Follow the regulations, and follow the guidance. Too many times in recent weeks, I have been told of examples of people with symptoms or who are awaiting a result being out and about in public spaces. That is simply wrong. I say this: "Stop it and wise up, for your actions prolong this period of public health risk and economic turmoil".

We need to monitor the impact of the regulations closely and decide which elements work and which do not. We also need to keep as a priority in our considerations mental health and the desperate loneliness that isolation brings. I encourage whatever actions are needed to keep our health service open, from GP services to surgery and from scans to chemotherapy and physiotherapy. We need our health service functioning for all who need it. We cannot shut down like before and leave the sick to get sicker, with a prognosis of deterioration. To do so would be seriously wrong. I therefore respectfully suggest that we look at requesting army medical support, if that would bolster our health service and keep vital elective care, including cancer operations, going in the second wave of coronavirus.

At this point, I thank the Minister, the Executive, the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer for their continued effort in what is an unenviable task. However, I respectfully ask the Health Minister what preparation he and his Department have made to deal with bed capacity, in particular, given the ongoing crisis in our healthcare system. We have known about this since early this year, and it would be good to hear what exactly he has done in preparation for what we knew was coming in a second wave. It is vital that a way is found to ensure that essential healthcare can continue, as highlighted by the Royal College of Surgeons last week, to avoid preventable non-COVID deaths as well as COVID deaths.

Ms McLaughlin: I support the motion. It is an important tool to help fight the cause of COVID. Minister, it is undoubtedly a worrying time, with significant rises in cases and hospital admissions in the last week. It is really hard to comprehend that 30% of the overall positive tests since March have been in the last week. It is getting out of control.

There is an obligation on me to share my concerns with the Assembly in relation to the escalation and spread of the virus in Derry. Astonishingly, in the space of a few months, Derry went from having the lowest rate of infection across the whole UK to the very highest rate. In the space of six weeks, that infection rate rose a hundredfold. The rest of the North, the rest of Ireland and, indeed, the rest of the UK need to understand what happened in Derry to avoid having the same disaster that we are experiencing. That would be much easier if we had an effective test-and-trace system, but we do not. However, we know some things. There were house parties, dinner parties, birthday parties and first Holy Communion at which hosts and visitors were complacent. A funfair was approved by the Executive Office despite the concerns of Derry City and Strabane District Council, and large numbers of those attending

— there were large numbers attending — did not socially distance and did not wear masks. Then — this is barely believable — we had a well-attended anti-mask rally last month. Inevitably, there was little or no social distancing. This is where it really becomes unbelievable: one of the speakers was a GP. She is also a political representative, an elected councillor. She is a qualified doctor. She spoke against wearing masks and against vaccinations. That level of irresponsibility must be condemned. It must have played a part in the spread of the virus, but how big a part we cannot tell.

As a result of the spread of the virus, there is potential for thousands of jobs to be at risk in the city and district. Hospitality businesses are at risk of collapse. Households will have difficulty paying their bills. The businesses and their workers desperately need our financial support. Firms in Derry and Strabane need to be covered by the extended furlough scheme, and Ministers in the Executive must stress that to the British Government.

My final words are these: beware of the conspiracy theorists, deniers and fantasists who are putting so many lives at risks and whose words will inspire people into their hospital beds and, perhaps, for a few, into their graves. There are few more dangerous things than politicians who ignore evidence, choose to believe what they want to believe and pretend that it is the truth. If they also happen to be doctors, that is just dangerous.

Mr Chambers: I certainly recognise the need for the motion and support it and those that will surely follow in the days, weeks and, indeed, even months ahead.

It is disappointing to hear leaks that can only have come from within the Executive being circulated in the public domain and debated on the radio. To date, the Executive's approach to the COVID pandemic has been an admirable, collective one.

There should never be a point when political point-scoring interferes with the responsibility of the Executive to protect the life and health of our citizens and sustain our National Health Service.

12.45 pm

In recent months, the staff at every level of our health service have gone far beyond what we should expect from them. They have toiled for long hours and have taken threats to their health and safety head-on. The leadership and support that they have received from the Health Minister have been rock solid. For that to have been otherwise would have risked a collapse in staff morale and commitment. That leadership and support have been publicly supported by the Executive every step of the way.

Any cracks in that collective leadership will have bad consequences. That is the last thing we need as we find ourselves being hit by increasing infection rates and rising hospital admissions. Most worrying is the number of people who need the intervention of ICU teams. If those figures continue to grow at the current rates, as a society, we could be in really deep trouble. Many people will die. The measures that are needed to curtail that lie in our hands. The Executive must be prepared to take whatever action is needed to minimise the impact of this dreadful virus on our population. If ever there was a vital moment when collective responsibility trumps everything, it is now.

This morning, I heard some politicians asking why their areas should suffer intensified restrictions when their rates of infection are much lower than those in other areas. In my area of North Down, the figures of infection are low. However, Northern Ireland is too small to start finger-pointing across constituency lines. Every day, I see convoys of vehicles leaving Bangor with workers bound for Belfast and other places, and the reverse happens later in the day as they return home. It is impossible to guarantee that the virus is not making that same journey along the A2. That situation is replicated every day in every corner of Northern Ireland.

I have also recently heard many Members calling for more evidence and data to support the actions that the Health Minister and, by extension, the Executive are taking. The evidence that I see and that convinces me that there is an issue that needs to be addressed is the number of people who have passed because of the virus and the number of people who have become infected and will endure a long and difficult recovery. What more evidence do any of us need?

I have also heard people put forward the argument of herd immunity. They say, "Well, sure, if everybody catches it, we will be fine". I would ask the same people who are making those arguments this: what is your evidence that, if someone catches it, as they recover, they will become immune, will not suffer a recurrence of it or, indeed, will not subsequently pass it on to others? Evidence from those people would be useful as well.

Will the Minister confirm that every minute of every day is vital as we fight against the virus? Will he also confirm that delay in taking decisive action could cause more misery and death?

The Minister spoke about the doubling time for COVID hospital admissions. Will he elaborate on that? I understand that, during the past weekend, around 140 people were admitted to hospital. Using that doubling rate, will the Minister tell us what he expects the rate of admissions to hospitals to be this weekend?

Ms Bradshaw: I too want to place on record my condolences to the bereaved families and my enduring thanks to our Health and Social Care staff in battling the virus.

I support the regulations and do so, in retrospect, out of necessity. I am extremely concerned about the interpretation of the evidence under which they, and amendment No 4, which was announced at the same time, were agreed. Once again, I need to repeat that there is a massive communications failure on the announcement of the amendment. These failures need to be urgently addressed.

First, with specific reference to amendment No 4, the First Minister said at a news conference on 21 September that the spread of the virus was happening in domestic properties and not in other environments. I believe that she meant primarily in domestic properties, but that was a clear statement to the public that the evidence from the Department of Health was that private homes were at a considerably higher risk than anywhere else. The deputy First Minister made similar comments in an interview at Stormont the following afternoon. However, that jarred somewhat with the Chief Scientific Adviser's advice that the spread of the virus, which had already begun to rise

exponentially in some council areas, was being driven by community transmission. Community transmission, by definition, means that the origin of the transmission cannot be identified. Of the cases identified it may well be the case that they were in homes, as pubs were not yet open, after all, but we do not know where many of the infections of unclear origin had taken place. It was subsequently confirmed that a significant share of cluster outbreaks is happening in gatherings in the hospitality sector.

We also have a problem with our contact tracing, which was identified just a few days ago by the acting Chief Medical Officer for the Irish Government. We are supposedly able to pick up where infections are taking place by working forwards from where the infectious people are at the time that others become infected. However, contact tracing in Asia works differently by asking instead where a positive case was at the time of infection and not just at the time of infectiousness.

Given the sheer scale at which case numbers grew, we need to accept that contact tracing was unable to give us the information about where people were at the point of infection. The Minister accepted that the scale of the rise in cases, particularly in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, was totally unexpected. If contact tracing was providing us with the evidence that we need about the nature of infections, such things would not be unexpected. Are we to believe that contact tracing was resourced and able to cope with something so unexpected and to continue to give us the evidence that we need about the actual point of infection? The acceptance that most cases arise from community transmission is an admission that we do not really know. Therefore, I ask the Minister to improve the resourcing of the contact-tracing service and urgently to consider amending it to include questions that will identify the location where someone was first infected and not just where they became infectious, as is the case in Asia. That will be crucial in the evidence base needed for going forward with any further regulatory amendments.

Unfortunately, what we have seen, from when the regulations were first announced on 17 September, is that we have missed the main areas where infections were rising. None of the initial postcodes to which the regulations applied was in Derry City and Strabane or in Newry, Mourne and Down, despite the fact that those are two of the three council areas worst affected by the rapid rise in cases. The trends were simply missed. What does that tell us about the quality of evidence under which we are operating and developing restrictions?

Before I come to communications, I also ask why more attention was not given to the general situation concerning how such regulations would be enforced. The requirement for no more than a single household to congregate in a private home was introduced when students were starting to congregate in our houses of multiple occupation (HMOs). I have spoken so many times about this, so I am not going to repeat it. However, we know that there are students who came to the Holylands in September, went home to their weekend jobs in the retail sector, bringing the infection back into their communities, and the inevitable and predictable happened.

I have serious reservations about the communications from the Executive Office and the Department of Health about the regulations, as well. Gloomy statements containing neither proposals nor action, late on a Friday

afternoon, do nothing to guide the population at a time of significant strain. The point has been raised before on evidence that people are getting tired of the same message over and over again. We need to explain to people not only what they need to do but why a measure is being introduced.

Communication was not helped by the fact that, in September, amendment Nos 4 and 5 pretty much came in on the same date and were blatantly contradictory. We were led to believe that that was because domestic transmission was a driver so restrictions were required in private homes but not in public venues. When the Committee asked to see the evidence, it never appeared, and the reason has since become apparent. It was because there was never a solid basis for such evidence, and, indeed, the evidence from elsewhere — as far afield as Melbourne or as near as Newport — was that wet pubs and their equivalent would lead to an obvious rise in increased transmission. We were told that the evidence was nuanced, but it really was quite clear. We should not have encouraged social mixing in indoor public venues at exactly the same time as discouraging it in indoor private homes. Either we encourage social mixing or we discourage it.

As I said, we have to clarify the reasons. If we are to introduce further restrictions, people need to know what they must avoid because we have to rely on people doing what they think is right in their communities and for their families. We need more buy-in.

There is a lot of justified concern among the public. Many cannot face the prospect of a further lockdown while others still feel insecure about leaving things as they are. It is time that we started to improve our evidence and communications, and getting the basic things right. The Chief Medical Officer has been clear that social mixing is the problem, so let us start with proposals from the Health Minister and the Executive for targeted interventions there.

Mr Easton: I intend to keep my contribution short. I am becoming more and more concerned about lots of issues — as, I am sure, the Health Minister is — including the lack of time to consider these restrictions. While I understand the need to adapt to the ever-changing circumstances of coronavirus, the inability to scrutinise properly is becoming a worry for me. The scene is changing rapidly; we change things every few days. I understand the need for that, but it is a worry because what we do and accept will have a huge impact on the population of Northern Ireland. I worry about the impact on our economy and any potential shutdown. It was deeply worrying and annoying to hear about that on 'The Nolan Show' this morning. Something like that should be at the Executive, and it should go to the Health Committee for discussion and to let us hear the reasoning behind it. It has caused absolute havoc out there for people who were listening, because they are not ready for it.

I hear about the ways in which people are handling the virus in different countries. Mr Allister mentioned the Swedish model last week, and Mr Chambers has just mentioned herd immunity: that is the same topic. Are we looking at that? Is the Chief Medical Officer looking at that? It is becoming a prevalent issue on the news, and I would like to know more about it. I am not a medical expert, but I would like us to know more about it.

I am becoming more worried as more cases are being reported. It is good that cases are being picked up in testing, but are we now reaching capacity with our testing? I hope that the Minister can update us on whether we can increase that capacity. I look at the mini lockdowns, as I call them, in Londonderry and Strabane and wonder whether those semi-lockdowns, as I should call them, are having any effect on reducing numbers in those areas. I really want to know about those things.

I am also worried about our capacity to handle the increase in coronavirus cases.

We have hundreds of nurse vacancies across Northern Ireland, and there are even some GP vacancies. Are we in a place to be able to handle the surge and the capacity issues?

I hope that the Minister can give me some updates on those issues. However, I am becoming increasingly worried about mental health and the increase in suicides. What we are doing affects people's lives, so I look forward to hearing more from the Minister on whether he can help.

1.00 pm

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as teacht isteach anseo ar maidin. I thank the Minister for coming here this afternoon. I support the regulations, although my support is not unqualified for any of the coronavirus regulations. In normal circumstances, we would not support them, but, given the situation that we are in, they are considered necessary.

It has already been mentioned that the process for the Health Committee's scrutiny of the regulations has come under some criticism recently. There was an issue at the Health Committee last week, when the Chief Scientific Adviser was giving evidence. He was asked about providing the Committee with the evidence to support the introduction of the regulations. He said that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) website was open to the public and that, if we wanted, we could go there, but there were thousands of pages. For me, it was not so much what he said as the way in which he said it. He gave the appearance of being reluctant to provide the Committee with the evidence that it needs to carry out its statutory role of scrutinising legislation. In terms of the process that the Committee is engaged in and what it needs to carry out its statutory role, the attitude of the Chief Scientific Adviser last week, in my view, certainly left a lot to be desired. If the Committee cannot be given the evidence that is being used to underpin the introduction of the regulations, it cannot do its job properly.

I understand — we all understand — that we are in a difficult situation, particularly now, with the rising number of infections. Added to that, there seems to be a rising number of pandemic deniers. We have anti-mask demonstrations, conspiracy theorists and every crackpot you can think of coming out and making sure that their voice is heard. We do not know how strong that view is out there, but there certainly appear to be cracks appearing in society's approach to the virus. That may be because, despite the rising number of infections, it appears that fewer people are dying. That can be explained in a number of ways. We are nine or 10 months into the pandemic, so we have more knowledge than we had at the start. There are treatments, drugs and so on available now

that were not available when the pandemic first hit us. It also appears that, at the minute, the infections are disproportionately affecting younger people, who are healthier and less likely to succumb to serious illness. It may well be that there is less fear in the community. However, we also have to take account of the fact that the numbers have risen very quickly, and, a week, two weeks or three weeks down the road, we could face an increase in the numbers of hospital admissions, serious illnesses and deaths. It is important that the Executive get that message out.

I agree with the issue that Paula raised on contact tracing. We have had six or seven months to get the contact tracing sorted out. I spoke here a couple of weeks ago about the difficulties that I had. We had a situation not long after that across the water where 16,000 people were not contact-traced as a result of some glitch in the technology, and the difficulties here have been well documented. I am concerned. I know that, when the contact tracing operation was re-established, only around 100 people were involved in it. You told us recently that there were recruitment adverts for other people to join that team. I am not sure that there were significant numbers; I think that it was 20 or maybe 40. If we are getting 1,000 cases a day, it will not be long before that contact tracing operation is completely overwhelmed. We need to take account of that.

It is not just about testing and tracing; it is also about isolating and supporting those who are isolated. I know of cases where people tested positive and did not isolate; they just went about their business. Some of them were in low-paid work and could not afford to isolate for a fortnight, so they went into work. When we talk about supporting those who have to isolate, we are talking about ensuring that there is financial support. I know that a £500 payment was agreed across the water and that people will get it, but it has not been introduced here, as far as I am aware. That is something that the Executive should maybe focus on.

Finally, we live on a small island. Irrespective of where we come from politically on that and on the partition of the island, if we do not operate collectively and collaborate across this island, it really does not matter what we do on either side of the border. We could put in place the best possible system, but, if those on the other side of the border do not do the same thing, that will be the weak link in the chain all the time. I implore the Minister to take account of the fact that the island should be treated as an epidemiological unit. Before any restrictions come in anywhere on the island, there should be discussions between the relevant CMOs and Health Ministers.

We are in a difficult situation. The Minister is in a difficult position. There are issues with capacity in our health and social care system. Questions have been raised about what preparations there have been over the past six or seven months, because we are all aware that we were waiting for a second surge. It would be interesting to hear about the extra precautions and extra capacity that have been built into the system to ensure that we can deal with that.

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to say a few words on the issue, following my Health Committee colleagues. First and foremost, I pass on my condolences, thoughts and prayers to the families of the bereaved and to those who are currently in hospital or are unwell with COVID. It is important that we continue to remember those

people as they go through their health situation. I also pay tribute to our NHS staff and all our carers out in the community. I thank the Health Minister for the role that he has played and, indeed, the Health Committee for its scrutiny role. We have seen the benefits of that over the past couple of months.

The regulations are welcome. Whilst we may not have wanted to see them, they were needed and will pay dividends. We know that the regulations have consequences and impacts beyond the health sector. Ultimately, it is about saving lives, but we must try to ensure that we balance the situation between lives and livelihoods. I have consistently said that we will not get out of the pandemic through regulations and restrictions alone. There will have to be personal responsibility, no matter what we say in the Assembly. Whilst we need to show leadership, we also need our communities and our neighbours to ensure that they follow the guidelines that are put in place and that they do so in a way that keeps them and others safe.

We also need a joined-up approach. In recent weeks, we have seen the Executive pulling together and trying to send out a joint message, but we also need our councils to ensure that that is implemented at all levels. I put on record my appreciation of the work done by my council, Derry City and Strabane District Council. We also talk about cross-border working. I was on a call last week with Donegal County Council and our council together, and that type of initiative is welcome, because this is not an orange-and-green issue or a North/South or east-west one. If we can drive down the number of cases, we need to do what we can to ensure that we do so. My council has taken the initiative with events and future planning, ensuring that we get in there at an early stage, and that is very important.

The Member for Foyle, my colleague Sinead McLaughlin, touched on some of the things that have happened at a local level that have been unfortunate. However, without politically point-scoring, I say that the Member may not be aware that her colleague, who is a Member of this Chamber, attended the funfair on a number of occasions. It is important that we all take personal responsibility and ensure that, when we throw stones, we do not do so in glass houses.

There is no blueprint for all this. We are all going through this at a time when we are trying our best. We need to give people the space to do that. As we look at further new potential restrictions, I urge the Health Minister and all Ministers in the Executive to look at the wider impacts, including the impact on our economy, on joblessness and employment and on mental health. I think that all Ministers will look at that, but, ultimately, we need to do what we need to do to ensure that lives are saved and protected.

Obviously, there is a lot of speculation about potential restrictions coming forward. My plea is around clarity. Members have touched on the issue of communication, and we need to articulate clearly what it is that we are looking at. We need to try to eradicate grey areas, because, as we have seen with some of the localised restrictions, there have been more questions than answers regarding what we do, where we shut down and what is able to open. If we can get as much clarity as possible and bring people with us on these issues, we will get out of it much quicker. I urge everyone to follow all the guidelines.

Continue to wash your hands, keep a distance and wear a mask where appropriate.

Ms Flynn: I start by recognising the pain amongst all the families who have sadly lost someone to COVID-19. We are still in a really worrying and anxious time, and I know that many members of the public are deeply concerned about the rising numbers of new cases that we are seeing and about the increasing numbers of hospital admissions that we are starting to see.

The regulations that we are discussing today came before the Health Committee, and other Members have spoken about some of the concerns around that process and the power that it grants to the Minister and his officials to make some of these difficult decisions. I will not go over all of that in detail, as some of it has been covered. Will the Minister endeavour to ensure that the Health Committee is supplied with as much information as possible, as it is requested, to help to make some of the necessary changes?

It is in everyone's interest that full scrutiny can occur. It is important that we have the full range of evidence to highlight when actions do not go far enough or are not proportional.

1.15 pm

I acknowledge that we are dealing with the regulations after they have come into play. Over the next few days and weeks, we will potentially be talking about other decisions that need to be made. Some Members have already quoted statistics, but I want to note how much the situation has changed since the regulations were made on 16 September. On that date, there were 129 new cases. Yesterday, there were 1,066. In the week leading up to 16 September, as has already been spoken about, Antrim and Newtownabbey had the highest rate of new cases, at just over 50 per 100,000 people. Yesterday, the rate for Derry and Strabane was at 946 per 100,000. On 16 September, there were 21 hospital cases of COVID-19, with three people in ICU. As of yesterday, there were 137 hospital cases of COVID-19, with 19 people in ICU. Even with restrictions already in place, it is alarming at how this virus can spread and is spreading. It is a stark warning. Restrictions are not the only answer to fighting COVID-19. Investment in public health services, such as testing and contact tracing programmes, is required, as is support for those who need to self-isolate and stay at home.

We are definitely not in a good place. We are seeing high rates, particularly around the border areas. That highlights the reality that the virus is spreading from community to community. As has already been said, we need to have a coordinated approach. Unlike with the first wave, we are now heading into the winter months, in which we know that Health and Social Care will be under significant strain and struggling to cope. So many operations are being cancelled and appointments being missed, and that is storing up problems for the future. The answer must include the central aim of suppressing the spread of COVID-19. Further action needs to be taken, but the Government and their agencies must provide support in order to have the appropriate systems in place that we need to help fight the spread of coronavirus.

Mr McCrossan: I support what I consider to be necessary regulations and the changes to previous regulations.

Minister, I pay tribute to you. This is a very challenging and difficult time. I do not envy the position that you are in or the very difficult and delicate decisions that you must consider and reach daily about this very fluid situation.

I also offer my condolences to the many families of the bereaved. To lose anyone at any time to whatever illness is a very difficult thing. To lose someone to this virus, which might have been picked up quite easily from someone who visited, is totally mind-boggling. It is beyond words and comprehension, particularly when the situation could have been avoided. That is the message that we need to get out to people. This virus transmits so easily. Some people do not even know that they have it, and, because they are not taking the necessary precautions, they may put others, perhaps in their own family or in their community, at risk.

I pay tribute to our front-line workers and key workers, who continue to provide a vital and life-saving service to our public and those in need. This has been a very difficult time. It has been a difficult year. There are businesses that have now been closed for almost eight months. Our society has been forever changed. Our lives have been impacted on by this virus in every way imaginable. It is difficult for everyone; it is difficult for all of our people, and it is certainly impacting on the mental health of our general population.

I was in isolation for two weeks. As a young person, I had symptoms of the virus and within those two weeks it impacted on me quite badly for five days and then eased. A very difficult part of that isolation was being at home for two full weeks without getting out. That was very tough, and I am a young person, so I can only imagine the impact that it has on people who have been at home for months, have made considerable sacrifices and are lonely as they live alone. Those people are severely impacted because they are so worried about getting the virus that they are doing everything possible to avoid it, often to the detriment of their own physical and mental health. Be in no doubt that it is having an impact on the health and well-being of our population. That is where we need to get the delicate balance right.

There are other people in our society who are struggling with other life-threatening illnesses and are concerned that the second wave, which has now arrived, will lead to their treatments being affected or cancelled. Those people need reassurance and need to be told that they will still be a priority and that cancer patients, in particular, and others will not be forgotten about and will not come second to the virus, because that is what is being spilled on pages of social media daily. There needs to be a solid message from this House, the Department and the Minister that we will not forget those who are in those very difficult and challenging circumstances. We should also continue to encourage those who are in those circumstances to continue to present to their doctor, their GP or the health service generally should they need to do so, because the health service is there for them.

This is a very delicate situation between protecting lives and protecting jobs and our livelihoods. With that comes immense pressure on our society, our people and our business owners. Asking a business to shut for almost eight months, as has been the case in some instances, creates a very stressful situation for a person who has a mortgage to pay and a family to feed. It has an impact on their mental health as well. That is why we must get

this right at every level. We have not got an endless pot of money — everyone knows that — but intervention for those in need at that time is absolutely critical, particularly to ensuring that they buy in to doing whatever they can to play their part. However, if someone is in a situation where they have to choose between feeding their family and keeping the business shut, they are in a very difficult place. That is why the intervention from this House, and from Westminster, for businesses needs to be meaningful and sufficient. This is not a direct criticism of the Minister — I understand that he is restricted — but the current intervention is not sufficient. I have heard that, and I am sure that his own party and others around the Chamber have heard the same.

As other Members have said, communication is absolutely vital. As Mr Middleton rightly pointed out, there is no blueprint for this; we do not have a book with all the answers in it that we can refer to. The situation is fluid, and we are learning about this new virus, how it affects each of us and how we live with it and move around it where possible. It is vital, in doing that, that we have confidence in the message. The Health Minister has continued to reiterate the message, as have others, but there needs to be confidence in the public message from the House. Yes, there is a five-party Executive, but we need to collectively pull together to ensure that we are all on the one page. That is difficult, because we are political parties with different views and opinions on how things happen.

One thing that we cannot toy with or play with is the clear guidance on how we protect each other and ourselves. Therefore, there is a job of work to be done to rebuild confidence in that message, and we, as Assembly Members, all have a part to play in that, because the public are leading us. They are ahead of us in a lot of things, but they are starting to ask serious questions, and they are entitled to do that. Their lives are being impacted, and they are entitled to ask questions. They are not entitled to mislead and to go on Facebook and state as fact things that are completely and absolutely untrue, because that, again, puts others at risk.

We, here, have a job of work to challenge the false narrative and present the truth as we go forward and learn. How we do that is by having a clear and transparent message. We can talk about the levels of infection and the death rates, but this virus has been around for eight or nine months, and people are frustrated, concerned, worried and fed up.

We should also state publicly the level of recovery to reassure people that, although they could die, people recover and recover well. There is a huge amount of concern and anxiety, so we need to ensure that we provide the clearest possible information to challenge that. That is why we need to come back to the fundamentals of this. Should we provide the numbers of people infected? Yes. Should we provide the numbers of people who, sadly, have died? Absolutely. We should also provide transparent information around the numbers of people who have recovered and recovered well and what the impact was. I know that that is difficult, as there are so many cases, but we need to put that information in the public domain.

What do we know about the virus? If we are shutting businesses and people's lives are affected, we need to provide the clearest possible information about the virus. What have we learned? Are we dealing with a lesser

strain? Are we dealing with a virus that has weakened, because we are not seeing the former high levels of death? Like other Members in this House, I remember watching footage from Italy on TV and seeing body bags on hospital floors and bodies being put in trucks and seeing them being buried. That scared the life out of me and many others. Luckily, we are not in that place, and I sincerely hope that we never will be, but we need to be very clear about what we are dealing with so that the public have confidence in the message.

There have been concerns raised around whether we have sufficient capacity to test people, and people have been asking whether tests are accurate. I am fed up listening to that question, and, thankfully, the Minister has committed to providing that public reassurance because, again, it is about transparency.

It is important that we put as much information in the public domain as we can to build confidence in that message. That is why some decisions taken during this pandemic may be questioned, and that is why some of the situations that we have found ourselves in over the last few weeks may have conflicted with the message that we have been sharing from this House, which is to keep 2 metres apart. Many people, including teachers and principals, have asked me, "Mr McCrossan, why are 30 children allowed to go into a classroom and then go home to their parents and grandparents and spread it?". It is a delicate situation, and it is very important that we educate our young people and our children, but it conflicted exactly with the message of keeping 2 metres apart, and the public raised questions.

Also, on the subject of conflicting messages, Eat Out to Help Out was a great scheme, and it supported businesses, but was the timing right? Is that not something that would have been better in January or February? Did that spread the virus or contribute to it? When you consider that 64 million people across the UK availed themselves of that scheme, that would suggest that it definitely played its part. I understand that there is no blueprint, but we have to get this right, and the message needs to be clear.

We need to protect jobs and livelihoods for the exact reason that I have given. As much as people are worried about this virus and are doing their part, closing businesses and adapting their lives, they need support, and, if they do not have that support, their mental health will be affected, which again, will add pressure to our already crippled health service.

It is very important that, at all times, we are consistent in what we are asking the public to do, because otherwise they will leave us. They will go ahead and raise questions, and, as we have seen, social media can take legs of its own. People believe false narratives as fact, and we have a great job to try to challenge that. On every day of the last month, I have been challenged on the message, as I am sure other Members have been, but I am true to that message, ensuring that, at all times, we ask people to play their part to keep each other safe.

1.30 pm

Ms Bradshaw raised the point that the First Minister said in a press statement that transmission was largely down to parties and social gatherings in houses, and I have

no doubt that they have played a part. We are human beings. Naturally, we want to come together. It has been challenging to be apart for eight months. However, house parties have certainly, in my view and in that of others, played a massive role. Last week, I told the deputy First Minister that it is my firm view that, particularly with the closure of pubs, restaurants and cafes, an element of the community will still have social gatherings in their homes because they can easily access alcohol from off-licences. I asked why we have not closed off-licences. When there is nowhere to go — I am not singling out young people — they will gather together in some spot. That is difficult to police; we will not even know that it is happening. That is where the virus will potentially be transmitted.

I have had parents crying to me on the phone because they have a son or daughter of 19 or 20 years of age who will not stay in the house and who is going out with friends. That parent is asking, "What am I to do: lock them in their room or put them out of the house?". Those parents are vulnerable and at risk, but they just cannot get the message through to young people, who think that they are invincible and that they will not spread the virus. That is what is so scary: as the Health Minister will know, some people who have had the virus do not produce any symptoms. That is the worry.

I ask the Health Minister to apply any pressure that he can to ensure that off-licences be dealt with, because many people are asking about that, and that he will do whatever he can to ensure that those who are making the sacrifices necessary to save lives — we are all making sacrifices — have the interventions necessary to support them in their closure, because that is critical.

I will finish by making the point that we all need to work collectively. We all know that, regardless of our political differences, the virus knows no border. It transmits with people. I live about three minutes' walk from the border. I sat at the famous Tinnies and watched the free flow of huge volumes of traffic on both sides of the border. In some instances, given that many people live in rural areas on both sides of the border, those were essential journeys by people who were going to shop. However, the interventions and regulations that have been made by the House do not seem to have had the effect that I thought they would. That concerns me. Things just seem to be as normal. One tries to explain whether it is a lockdown or restrictions, but what is it? That is very difficult. That is why the message needs to be clear.

As Mr Sheehan rightly said, we need to work right across these islands. We are one island. We need to work with the Irish Government, as I know the Health Minister and others have done, to ensure that we have the strongest possible approach to protecting human life and livelihoods. We all have a part to play, not just in spreading the message, getting it out there and ensuring that it is clear, but in challenging the false narrative that is getting many people's attention. The only way in which we can challenge that narrative is by clear, consistent messaging with the facts and supporting evidence.

Ms S Bradley: I did not expect to be called, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but I appreciate the opportunity because I, too, want to offer my condolences to all those who have lost loved ones throughout the pandemic. I also want to thank the Minister and all his colleagues, who face a

situation that changes hourly and the difficulties that arise from it.

I have listened carefully to the commentary in the House. There has been much speculation, even by us, about the age profile of those amongst the number with the virus. That number is growing at a frightening and alarming rate. I am fearful about the growing narrative that, ultimately, young people are the rule breakers or lawbreakers. From my own outings, which I restrict at every opportunity, on many occasions, I see people who do not fit that age profile who are being equally as complacent. It may be that those individuals have exemptions from having to wear a mask or do not feel that they fit into any profile that specifically endangers them. If the latter is the case, what a selfish act that is. It is very selfish for people to go about their business and somehow feel that they are immune to the virus, showing no sense of responsibility to those around them or to the vulnerable. I join other Members in putting out that message. It is good to hear that the House is united against people with anonymous accounts, and some who are not anonymous, who spread absolute rubbish, with no foundation, that suggests that there is something other than facts behind the decisions that are made.

I listened to my colleague Mr McCrossan asking for clarity, because the messages can be contradictory. However, the messaging will be contradictory at times because this is not absolute situation; it is a balancing act. Of course we want our children to go to school, and life, as we all know it, to resume, but we cannot have it that way. We are all charged with finding out how much we can get away with without the risk of taking the virus home to the people who will be most affected. I do not come here expecting absolute clarity or for all the decisions to follow logic. That will not be there as there is no absolute answer. We all have different perspectives. We all come with different priorities about what is important in our lives, which may be to do with your age profile or where you live. There is no doubt that everyone will have different solutions. We have to do our very best to reach out to everyone. If we ask someone to isolate, we have to know in our heart of hearts that they have the financial power to do that. That may be the £500 that was mentioned earlier, which still has to be announced.

We need to know that we can empower people with knowledge about support mechanisms. If people need to go into isolation or lockdown, they need to know that they will have access to food, medicines and support. Mental health and loneliness issues need to be recognised, and we must empower communities to support one another.

As I said, I did not expect to be called to speak, but I welcome the opportunity. I support the regulations and recognise that more may need to be done. All Members have a duty to stand up with one voice and explain to the public why they have as much of a role to play in this as we do.

Mr Allister: I will make a few comments in a moment about the pros and cons of various issues. I want to pick up on what the Chair of the Health Committee had to say in his opening remarks. I am not a member of the Health Committee, but I will take at face value what we were told. He rightfully made the criticism that, if the Committee is not being provided with the data that justify the regulations, that is a very poor situation. The Committee cannot

scrutinise without knowing the facts relating to the issues that it is scrutinising. That is a valid contention.

The Chair said that there was concern in the Committee about the lack of oversight for any future additions and changes to these regulations. I strongly share that concern. At schedule 2 to the regulations, there are a couple of things that I find surprising. Paragraph 1(2) of schedule 2 states:

“A direction ending the emergency period ... may be revoked at any time by the Minister of Health”.

“Fair enough”, you might say, because that is after “consulting” the experts, but let us think about that. It talks about a situation in which the emergency has been revoked. The Health Minister, and only the Health Minister, with no need to consult anyone other than the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser, can make a direction revoking the ending of the emergency period. It is there in black and white. It states:

“the effect of such revocation is that the emergency period then immediately recommences.”

At the stroke of a pen, the Health Minister alone can decide to reinstate the emergency. If those plain words mean what they seem to mean, they drive a coach and horses through the idea of anyone, never mind a scrutiny Committee, or even the Executive, having any say. Paragraph 1(4) states that any direction or revocation of the emergency:

“is made by being published online and must, as soon as reasonably practicable after it is made, be published in the Belfast Gazette”.

Therefore, by publishing online a revocation of the emergency, and by having it published in the ‘Belfast Gazette’, the emergency can be reinstated. That does not seem to me to be an adequate course embracing the basic concepts of consultation. That is in addition to the point that the Chair made about being able to take away from or add to the various postcodes etc simply by making a direction. You can do much more than that. Under this regulation, we are giving power to the Minister to reinstate an emergency that has been revoked by simply decreeing such. I am not sure that that is a healthy situation.

It is not that I do not trust the Health Minister. The Health Minister has, I think, the most difficult job in government. Any of us would be foolish to envy him his role, but we are giving him phenomenal power if we are giving him, by a mere direction made in that manner, the right to recommence the emergency. I therefore question why that regulation is drafted in such sweeping terms. The emergency periods had to pass through a legislative process here, but we seem to be adopting a great shortcut in respect of that, about which I, for one, am not happy.

The Chair mentioned the lack of data to back up some of these regulations. That is a real concern. However, if you listen to the media today, you will learn that that is a concern not only in the Committee. According to some anonymous source in the Executive, that is a concern in the Executive. Really? According to that source, the Executive are not being given the data that would justify such decisions as the reported call from the Chief Medical Officer for a six-week lockdown.

I am staggered, if that is so, that data as basic, far-reaching and essential as that is not being given to the Executive, if that is correct. It is beyond appalling to think that they could be asked to impose a six-week lockdown without having the basic data. We need urgent clarity on the veracity of that claim. If it is not true, that needs to be rectified; if it is true, the circumstances that give rise to it need to be rectified. Either way, it cannot be right.

1.45 pm

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member's giving way. Commentary on data can pertain to health data. Does the Member agree that, in considering any potential restrictions that would impinge on schools, for example, we need to look at the impact that the closure of schools had? In one school in my constituency that I am familiar with, a third of children engaged in zero online learning. There was no interaction at all. The impact that that has now on the school is phenomenal. Therefore, we need to look at the impact of previous lockdowns on children's education, on our economy and on employment as well as at the health data, which is important in informing people when taking such decisions.

Mr Allister: I agree absolutely. In fairness to the Health Minister, he said in his opening remarks that it was a balance and that it was not just about health, although, obviously, that is his primary discipline and concern. The Member is absolutely right: there has been considerable damage done — some of it may be irreparable — to some people's well-being and to kids. To think that we would move to a six-week lockdown without the data is staggering.

My fundamental question about moving into lockdowns is this: where is the exit strategy? How do you get out of the lockdowns? As I said last week, if, every time there is a rise in the infection rate, you introduce a form of lockdown, you will never build any immunity in the community. The Member for North Down does not like that idea. I think that most scientific data relating to COVID seems to agree that there is an element of immunity in those who have had it, though there may be some dispute about how much. If, every time the infection rate — not the death rate — rises, you go into a lockdown, when do you ever get out of it? The next time you come out and the infection rate rises again, because the virus is still there, you go into another lockdown. Where is the exit strategy? It is that ongoing effect that will really begin to kill our economy and put us in a very perilous position.

Yes, it is necessary to have regulations and to supervise them, but it is also necessary to think through what the long-term strategy in all this is. I understand entirely that the first lockdown was premised on a great fear of our health service being overwhelmed. We were told that 15,000 people could die. In what was a balanced and considered speech made with the authority of someone who has had COVID, Mr McCrossan referred to the situation in Italy. We all saw that, and it was frightening. It was no great surprise, therefore, that there was a fear of our health service being overwhelmed back in March. Can we really say with the same vigour or conviction that that same threat exists today? There are 18 or 19 people in our ICUs with COVID-19, and there were two deaths, I think, last week. Can we really say, as justification for a wholesale six-week or whatever lockdown, that the

threat is such to our health service that we must have that? When you put all that into the balance of what will be the increasing impact on the well-being of the wider community and of our economy, you see that, frankly, the threshold for lockdown gets higher, not lower. I fear that we are maybe a little too ready to rush to a lockdown, with no exit strategy and insufficient thought given to what it ultimately does to the whole community.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is now 1.51 pm. I assume that the Minister will take more than 10 minutes to respond to the points made. If not, you can indicate that to me. Do you think that it will take a bit more than that?

Mr Swann: I would say that it will take more than that, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is what I suspected, and I do not think that it would be fair to the Minister to allow him to get nine minutes in and then bring him back after Question Time for the remaining three or four minutes, so I propose that we take our ease until Question Time.

Mr Swann: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I would prefer to start and see how much I get through.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. Yes, that is fine. If you are happy with that, that is fine. I call the Minister.

Mr Swann: I am always at the House's call, and I have been since this place came back.

I am grateful to Members for their contributions to the debate. I deliberately widened my opening comments beyond the regulations that we are talking about today, because I am cognisant of the fact that, when we have come here to talk about such regulations, there has been a wide-ranging debate. Given where we are today, I thought that it was only just and right that the House had the opportunity to have a wider discussion. I appreciate the degree of goodwill that the Assembly has shown, given that this is not the usual process and that legislative scrutiny of the regulations is being applied only after the event. Nevertheless, it is important that scrutiny takes place in order to examine and comment on the measures that have been taken. In the current context, things move fast, and the observations and concerns of Members and colleagues are taken on board as we develop policy and work on the next set of amendments. The public must have confidence that the Executive are not acting without scrutiny, and, for that reason, I am happy to respond to questions and comments raised by Members during the debate.

As always, I thank the Chair and the Health Committee for their scrutiny of the regulations. As Mr Sheehan said, in normal times, the Health Committee would not be doing this, and the House would not be accepting the regulations. In normal times, I would not be introducing them. It is as simple as that — I have said that on a number of occasions — but we are not in normal times.

I picked up on the Chair's comments about a lot of this being done by direction and about the departmental analysis that is allowed, the timing and the openness that the Committee gets. Some of the struggles and challenges are because the regulations are being brought forward by Health and many of the underlying issues are outwith the Health remit, such as soft-play areas, pubs and licensing. The regulations, however, fall to the Health Committee to

analyse, and that is why I endeavour to ensure that my Department provides as much support as it can.

The Health Committee's conversation about bubbles was brought back to me. The Chair indicated that the issue was the abuse of bubbles and how, if somebody was able to turn a bubble on and off in a matter of hours, if not the next day, that would start to undermine the whole principle and the benefit that bubbling brings in how we manage the transmission.

Where we were when the regulations were made — a number of Members referred to this — is a very different place from where we are today. That is why they have been and will be superseded.

The Chair then spoke as Sinn Féin's health spokesman. Given the current spread and trajectory of the virus, I can openly and honestly say, hand on heart, that it is clear that our health service is under pressure. I have said many times in the House recently that we have been trying to run three health services. Long before COVID, when Bengoa proposed his changes, he made it clear that we needed to run a health service plus a transformation service. When the initial wave of COVID set in, we transformed to a COVID service, and many of our day-to-day services and elective surgeries were challenged and cancelled. We have got to a place in which we do not want that to happen again, but, given the current trajectory, if we do not have interventions and have them soon, we will have to revert to a COVID service, for the simple fact that we cannot turn people away at the door of a hospital because they have COVID.

When it comes to re-establishing ICUs and the specialty regional approach that we took in the tower block, we will need 100 nurses for 15 ICU beds. We can do that only by stripping ICU nurses from across the entirety of our health service in the Province. When we put that number of people into ICU beds, we need anaesthetists from across the Province. When we take anaesthetists out of our health service, no matter where they work or for which trust, that has an adverse impact on the number of operations that can be performed. When it comes to answering the question of how much we did and are doing to prepare, I say that I cannot create nurses or anaesthetists in two or three months. Beds are a physical thing, but I have said this before and maintain this view, and all of us in the House have championed them: it is the resilience of the health service staff and their flexibility and adaptability wherever they work across the health service that we rely on. They did a fantastic job in the first wave.

I will come back to my comments after Question Time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question Time begins at 2:00 pm, so I suggest that the House take its ease until then to allow for a change at the top Table. After Question Time, the debate will resume, when the Minister will conclude his remarks.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Economy

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister for stepping in at such short notice to cover the swap today and tomorrow with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to facilitate the deputy First Minister's inability to attend and the First Minister's dealing with the COBRA meeting. I remind Members that we have time constraints for questions and responses.

Redundancy Entitlements

1. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will bring forward legislative changes to deliver improved redundancy entitlements by the end of the current Assembly mandate. (AQO 892/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank the Member for her question.

I have no plans currently to amend redundancy legislation operating in Northern Ireland. The existing legislative framework offers robust protection for workers in that difficult position with regard to redundancy consultation notice period and pay. Employers must adhere to that framework. Workers have a right to complain to an employment tribunal if they believe that they have been unfairly dismissed or that their redundancy rights have been breached. Employers and employees can also avail themselves of confidential and impartial information provided by the Labour Relations Agency.

Where the COVID-19 situation requires adjustments to employment legislation, I will of course make those adjustments. In August, I introduced the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Coronavirus, Calculation of a Week's Pay) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 to ensure that those furloughed under the coronavirus job retention scheme would not see reductions in any entitlements associated with the termination of employment that are based on the calculation of a week's pay. My officials will continue to engage with their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom to establish whether any further changes will be required as a result of the introduction of the new UK-wide job support scheme.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, thank you for your answer. It is completely unfair that, under current legislation, workers under the age of 22 are entitled to less redundancy pay than older workers, regardless of whether they have the same term of service. Young people are more likely to lose their jobs due to COVID. Therefore, will the Minister end the age discrimination in redundancy entitlements and standardise redundancy pay across all age groups?

Mrs Dodds: The calculation for statutory redundancy payments is complex. It is dependent on age, length of service and contractual earnings. Redundancy pay is calculated using an employee's normal wage and includes regular overtime and any bonus or commission. There are statutory limits to redundancy pay, which is capped at

£16,800. The Member is correct when she says that young people are more likely to be impacted by unemployment as a result of COVID-19 and the economic conditions that we are suffering.

To help with that overall problem, I have introduced the apprenticeship support schemes and additional training places so that young people might reorientate and have a pathway in life, which is really important for them.

Mr Catney: Minister, can you tell me how many redundancy notices your Department has received since March?

Mrs Dodds: I do not have the exact figure, but I will of course write to the Member with it. Up to June, over 4,000 people had been made redundant. Many, many more redundancies are in the pipeline. I have warned on many occasions — and I took the opportunity to do so yet again in the House earlier today — that, in dealing with the increase in the transmission of the virus, any restrictions that we, as an Executive and as a community, impose on business will inevitably lead to higher levels of unemployment and greater difficulties in the labour market. I will do my best to try to help people in such very difficult circumstances.

Mr Dickson: Minister, can you tell the House what action you are taking with your departmental officials and local government to ensure that those who are unfortunate enough to have been made redundant are given adequate and full advice?

Mrs Dodds: There is full advice for young people through our Careers Service. In conjunction with the Department for Communities and jobs and benefits offices, we give the type of advice in that area that people would expect. These are incredibly difficult times for the Northern Ireland economy. I cannot stress enough how we need to support each other and also support jobs. I am delighted that, even in the midst of such difficult times, we have announced 1,600 new jobs and new investment in Northern Ireland. It is important to remember that.

Employee Support when Self-isolating

2. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions she has had with private sector employers about the need to support employees that are required to self-isolate. (AQO 893/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. Throughout the COVID pandemic, I have continued to meet business organisations and businesses regularly to hear at first hand the impact being felt by businesses and their employees and the impact on the wider economy. During those discussions, I have talked to business organisations specifically about how they can support employees who are required to self-isolate. I have urged employers to show flexibility to employees who are required to self-isolate and to treat them fairly. I encourage employers to support self-isolating workers in working from home if practicable. I will be meeting business representatives again later in the week — I do that regularly — when I will be reinforcing this message. If we are to get on top of the health crisis that we are experiencing, it will be important that people have the space and ability to self-isolate when they are required to do so.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, you will be aware of the level of anxiety that exists around the virus. I am very conscious that, for anyone who cannot log in from the kitchen, the stress around COVID-19 will be exacerbated by the moral dilemma that they now find themselves in. The fact that, for most people, statutory sick pay is so much lower than a week's wages means that they are forced to choose between feeding their family and keeping themselves and others safe. Minister, will you advise the House whether you will consider some form of financial package to mitigate the financial loss to low-paid private sector workers who are asked to self-isolate and do not have the option to work from home?

Mrs Dodds: I fully understand the dilemma that the Member expresses. Last week, we met members of the trade union Unite. There were young people from across Northern Ireland on that call, and that was one of the dilemmas that they expressed very clearly to me. The moral dilemma is the difficulty of living on statutory sick pay set against the need to isolate and make sure that they, their families, their wider community and their workplace are safe. The Department for Communities delivers a discretionary support scheme, and I will write to the Member with the details, because it is valuable and worthwhile that some folk will be able to refer to it in this situation.

Mr Dickson: Minister, what action is your Department taking to support employees who are either currently, or are likely to be very soon, banned from working, and what are you doing to address the knock-on effect on the supply-chain employees who will be equally affected?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. It is pertinent and apt in these very difficult circumstances.

The Chancellor's statement on Friday indicated that there will be support of up to two thirds of their salary for people whose businesses were asked to close as a result of the localised health guidelines in particular areas. We are looking for the further detail of that scheme, but, of course, that will not have an impact on businesses that have been curtailed because of the measures or, for example, businesses in the food-service sector, which will be equally curtailed, that are supplying to the restaurant and hospitality industries. These are very difficult choices, and the Executive will have some very difficult decisions to make. I expect that those choices will be made in full cognisance of the economic difficulties, the facts and the impacts on the economy and the various sectors.

Sectoral Support Funding

3. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will bid for funding from the £55.2 million central fund identified by the Minister of Finance for further sectoral support. (AQO 894/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. As I have said many times in the House, I remain committed to working with my Executive colleagues to provide support to as many businesses as possible as we deal with the health, economic and societal impacts of the pandemic.

The £55.2 million fund was identified as part of the Executive's discussion on our economic recovery response. Since that time, there has been a concerning rise in the number of cases of the virus. The Executive

have now introduced further measures, including enhanced localised lockdown restrictions in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area.

It is important that any further support measures are considered within the ever-changing context that we are operating in, and we must retain the flexibility to adapt to the changes in virus spread and public health advice. I have met businesses in the north-west about the impact on them and the restrictions that they now face, and there will be a significant impact on those local businesses. The Minister of Finance has brought forward a scheme to address those local restrictions, and that will be pertinent to other areas, should they experience the same issues.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her response. It seems inevitable that further restrictions will apply across Northern Ireland as we try to tackle the second wave of COVID-19. Can the Minister give me an assurance that she will bid for additional funding from this pot and from any other moneys available to the Executive to support workers and businesses and ensure that we, in Northern Ireland, do not have a situation where people are excluded from support when we are facing into what really is a cut-price lockdown?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. His concerns are absolutely uppermost, I presume, in the minds of most Members across the House today.

To satisfy the Member, I will refer to a letter that I sent to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on Friday after the Chancellor made his statement and it was assumed that around £200 million in Barnett consequentials would be made available to Northern Ireland in light of any restrictions that we would implement here to deal with the pandemic.

In that letter, I identified a very full range of supports that are needed in Northern Ireland, including for those who have been excluded so far: manufacturing, microbusinesses, further discretionary funds, councils and, indeed, the need for an economic recovery fund, for which I think that we will need around £500 million in the next year.

2.15 pm

Mr Middleton: The Minister will no doubt be aware that we are facing a situation of further localised lockdowns or a national lockdown; we do not know at this stage. Do the Executive have the financial firepower to protect every job and business and ensure that we come out of this with some sort of economy?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. The House will be very aware that I have said that Northern Ireland cannot afford another lockdown. Just this morning, certain economists indicated very small green shoots of recovery for some sections of our economy. Those could be damaged by further restrictions and a further lockdown.

I was with the Member in the north-west when we spoke to businesses, the Chamber of Commerce and representatives of tourism and hotels in the maiden city. We all recognise that, by ourselves, the Northern Ireland Executive do not have the financial firepower to support businesses in the way that they were supported in March, April and May. The job retention scheme, for example, during that period was worth £75 million every week to

the Northern Ireland economy with the level of support that it gave to jobs. Any subsequent schemes that have been announced by the Chancellor see a restriction of that support and certainly will not support jobs in Northern Ireland at that level. We simply will not be able to do it in the way in which we have done. Therefore, I urge caution in the way in which we proceed during the week.

Mr Boylan: Minister, during the first lockdown, industries such as construction and tourism suffered heavily. If more restrictions were to be introduced, what can you do to support those industries? They were hit very hard first time around.

Mrs Dodds: I was heartened to hear a discussion on the radio this morning. They were talking about recovery, particularly in the construction sector, and I think that that is reflected across Northern Ireland. Indeed, I was delighted to be in mid-Ulster, where we announced an additional 130 jobs that were driven by the manufacturing/construction sector and their access to the Great Britain market. That was immensely encouraging.

We will have national schemes, but we must at all costs avoid the propensity to rush without the proper facts, assessments and financial supports at our disposal. The Northern Ireland economy will suffer from the impact of COVID-19 and the restrictions for many years to come. Indeed, we see that in hospitality and tourism, in which many businesses are just hanging on and nothing more. Any further restrictions, lockdowns or lessening of their ability to make a living will impact on their viability. We are at that stage, and we must recognise that. If we do that as an Executive, we have a duty to support those companies.

Mr Stewart: I agree totally that we need to speak with one voice and continue to lobby Her Majesty's Government for as much financial support as they can give to businesses. Back in September, when you were last at the Economy Committee, Minister, you talked about a scoping exercise that your officials were conducting with their Welsh and Scottish counterparts to look at a support package for businesses that had, to date, been unable to avail themselves of any funding and support. Will you give us an idea of how that scoping exercise is going and whether we are likely to see the fruit of their labour any time soon?

Mrs Dodds: Yes. I thank the Member for his question. My officials have been in touch with our counterparts in Wales and Scotland on this issue. We want to learn from the difficulties that they have had with the scheme. The main aspect of this that comes up, over and over again, is the fact that we need to have access to that HMRC data in order to make the scheme viable and be able to implement it. Wales and Scotland have highlighted that as a particular difficulty. Again, I refer to my answer and my letter, on Friday of last week, to the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which outlined the amounts that would be required for such bids.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Minister, the Finance Minister recently announced the package for businesses in Derry and Strabane. Largely speaking, the reports are that it is not sufficient, given the challenges that they have faced. Does the Minister believe that it is sufficient? Has she had any conversations about increasing that funding, given that this is the second time that businesses in Strabane and Derry have had to close their doors?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I, too, have spoken to those businesses and to many hotels in that area. The scheme that the Finance Minister introduced was one that was affordable by the Northern Ireland Executive. However, it clearly demonstrates the exact point that I make over and over again: without national interventions and the support of Her Majesty's Government, we will be unable to support businesses at the level at which they require.

Renewable Energy Targets

4. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister for the Economy how she intends to meet the target of 70% renewable energy generation for Northern Ireland by 2030. (AQO 895/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I will begin by clarifying that I have not yet set a 70% target. Through the development of the energy strategy, my Department is considering a number of targets. My statement on 29 September set out my belief that this should not be below 70%. However, the strategy will inform how those targets are set more formally as we go forward.

A variety of actions will be required to deliver a target of this scale. Work is ongoing to assess the need for appropriate support mechanisms, whether they be financial, regulatory or otherwise, to bring forward investment. Consideration is also being given to how to bring about a more diverse technology mix and how to further involve and engage citizens to assist in meeting our decarbonisation goals. Through the development of the energy strategy, my Department is working with key stakeholders to provide cost-effective options, which I intend to put out for public consultation in March 2021, with a view to finalising the strategy later in the year.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister. There is no doubt that your strategy mentions the figure of 70%. On that basis, I think that, in this climate, that target is very ambitious. Will the Minister rule out any exploration for oil and gas in Northern Ireland, including fracking?

Mrs Dodds: We are to have a debate on that tomorrow, and I will outline the position on those issues during that debate.

We have a strong pipeline of projects in the planning process. However, if we are to meet that 70% target, we will need to ensure that we have an appropriate regulatory framework and that we are able to bring forward legislation that will support companies and individuals in trying to meet it. I have looked at some of the schemes that are operating in the rest of the United Kingdom, and I am keen to extend some of them here so that we will be able to get off the baseline of that target pretty quickly. Of course, I am ever mindful of this matter, and I remind the House that 48% of electricity in Northern Ireland is generated through renewables.

Mr McGuigan: Further to Mr Catney's question, and I understand the Minister's saying that there is a debate on this tomorrow, given the climate emergency, the desire and, indeed, the necessity to meet targets to reduce greenhouse gases, does the Minister agree that her Department's time would be better spent further researching and developing renewable forms of energy rather than researching the well-documented effects

of practices such as fracking and then committing to a moratorium on petroleum licensing for exploration?

Mrs Dodds: Again, we will debate that in full tomorrow. The legislation that we operate under for petroleum licensing is particularly old. It requires updating, and I will bring forward research to help inform how the House and the Executive go forward with those issues. The Member will also acknowledge that I have said that, for the recovery of the economy in Northern Ireland, we want to have a greener, cleaner and more sustainable economy. The Member will see my commitment to that when the consultation documents go out on the energy strategy. Indeed, in my 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy' document, I recognised that a greener economy is essential for the future of Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: Given that with renewable energy, particularly that from wind turbines, very significant costs have been passed on to electricity consumers, will the Minister undertake to publish an accurate audit of how much electricity consumers are paying for renewable energy?

Mrs Dodds: I will revert to the Member on that, but I also refer him to the regulator for a table of such costs.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for her commitment to the renewable energy scheme. Given how dependent households are on imported oil for home heating and that around 300 independent oil suppliers operate across Northern Ireland, what steps will her Department take to ensure that those operators are part of the solution and are encouraged to diversify?

Mrs Dodds: As part of the energy strategy, we have a number of different work streams to ensure that we have a complete picture of the energy that is required in Northern Ireland. Everyone is entitled to be part of those work streams. They are very wide and varied, and, of course, all will be able to respond to the consultation in March 2021.

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

Students: Financial Support

5. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to increase the financial support for higher education students. (AQO 896/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. My Department is responsible for the provision of financial support to higher education students through Student Finance NI. In 2018-19, that amounted to £422 million across a range of products such as maintenance grants, loans, tuition fee loans, the disabled students' allowance and more. The demand for those products is monitored closely, and proposals to change the levels of student support may be brought forward as appropriate. For example, my Department will shortly launch a public consultation on postgraduate support that, amongst other things, will consider the level of postgraduate tuition fee loans that are available.

In addition, my Department provides support funds to the universities for distribution to students who are facing genuine financial hardship.

In April, I secured an additional £1.4 million of funding for student hardship from the Executive. I matched that with a further £1.4 million from my Department's budget, bringing

the amount available for student hardship to £5.6 million in the current financial year. Any changes to the levels of student support provided must be considered in line with the needs of our students and our higher education sector and the budget available to my Department and may require Executive approval.

2.30 pm

Mr Sheehan: You will be aware, Minister, that many people have lost their job as a result of the pandemic and want to reskill and retrain and maybe do a second degree in a different field or postgrad study, but the cost of childcare and poor financial support for postgrad students are obstacles. Has the Minister had specific discussions with the Student Loans Company or the universities about increasing support for postgrad students?

Mrs Dodds: As I indicated in my answer, that is one of the areas that I have been talking about. I have given much thought to the position of postgraduate students, and additional funds have been made available via the monitoring round in respect of that. In the near future, I will also bring forward a consultation document on the issue.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions. I advise Members that question 1 has been withdrawn.

Transform to Deliver Strategy

T2. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for the Economy how her Department has engaged with trade unions on the Transform to Deliver strategy, on which she has been contacted by a number of lecturers and teaching staff from further education colleges who are concerned. (AQT 532/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. As is right and proper, we have a wide range of consultation processes around that strategy, as we did on reopening the colleges recently. I will continue to work with the trade unions and the further education colleges to ensure that we do our best to have the best possible options for further education students in the future.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for her answer. My understanding is that, if implemented, the strategy would cut staff pay across the board, remove the cap on teaching hours and remove collective bargaining rights for teaching staff who oppose it. I am aware of serious concerns that departmental officials have failed to engage with trade unions and representatives on the changes. Minister, at a time when we are trying to support workers and families, will you give a guarantee that you will not subject teaching staff to unfair and exploitative conditions?

Mrs Dodds: Of course, much of this has been conducted by the further education colleges, as the paying body in relation to this. If the Member has specific allegations that she wants to raise with me, she would be absolutely entitled to do so, and I would be happy to meet her or to have some communication on that issue.

Job Retention Scheme

T3. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any further information on the job retention scheme that was recently announced at Westminster. (AQT 533/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Chancellor made his statement on Friday. My Department is working to understand the full implications of that scheme. We know that it will offer two thirds of wages for businesses that have been instructed to close. However, as I said, the issue for the economy as a whole is that many businesses' activities are curtailed or are part of the supply chain where the scheme will not be applicable to them. That is a significant difficulty with the scheme in question. Of course, we will await the full detail as we assess where we are, but it brings it home to me and to Members in the House that the decisions that we take this week will have huge impacts on prospects and employment in Northern Ireland.

Ms S Bradley: Thank you, Minister. I noted your words about the Northern Ireland economy not being able to weather another lockdown. However, given that the Minister is not up to date on the possible closure dates for such a scheme, is it not important that she open her mind and consider that this may be the window of opportunity in which we can financially assist some businesses in some way?

Mrs Dodds: The national schemes that are available to us in Northern Ireland are the furlough scheme, which will end in October; the job support scheme; and the scheme that was announced by the Chancellor on Friday, which will be implemented from November. Those schemes will undoubtedly have the impact of helping some companies to deal with the space that they are in. For the scheme that the Chancellor announced on Friday, however, companies will need to be instructed legally to close by the Executive in order for them to avail themselves of it. We still do not know whether companies that are in the supply chain and whose business will be curtailed will be able to avail themselves of the scheme in the way in which they availed themselves of the previous furlough scheme, whereby they could place some of their employees on the scheme while servicing the bit of the economy that was still open.

As I said, these are extremely difficult circumstances for the Northern Ireland economy, for workers and for those who have spent their life building a business and may now see it go under simply because of the circumstances in which we now find ourselves. It brings home to me over and over again the fact that we need to ensure that the Northern Ireland economy is viable, open and able to trade for the future.

Apprenticeship Pathways

T4. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the apprenticeship pathways that are to be included in the new skills strategy for Northern Ireland that her Department has been working on for 18 months or more. (AQT 534/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. The issue is extremely important to me. We need to ensure that our young people have career pathways. When we look at information from some of those who critically examine the Northern Ireland economy, we find that, at levels 3 and 4, we are missing many of the skills that are required really to drive our economy forward. Apprenticeships are a really important and valuable way of doing that. I have therefore been looking at the Training for Success programme, the apprenticeship programme and the higher-level apprenticeship programme, which has a

pretty phenomenal rate of success. I want to increase and enhance those programmes. When we bring out the skills strategy next year, the Member will see my commitment to doing that. Northern Ireland deserves all-age apprenticeships so that not only can young people train and have a pathway and a career but people at any stage of their life can be allowed to retrain.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for her answer. I fully agree that all-age apprenticeships are absolutely critical, particularly in the current environment.

The Minister spoke about the energy sector and the changes and upgrades that we will be expected to meet. Is she developing networks with our universities to support innovation and skills development in the energy sector so that people might be able to feed into apprenticeship schemes?

Mrs Dodds: That is an important question. One of the things that will be really important to Northern Ireland's energy sector is the potential for hydrogen in the Northern Ireland economy. There is exciting potential for a hydrogen academy, where we will take young people, train them and work with them in that part of the energy sector. I am committed — I have said it, and I mean it — that we will have a greener, cleaner sustainable energy platform for Northern Ireland going forward. That is important for the environment, but it is also important for jobs and prosperity in Northern Ireland.

FE Colleges: COVID-19 Outbreaks

T5. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for the Economy how many COVID-19 outbreaks there have been among students and staff in further education colleges since the resumption of on-site learning, given that, on 5 June, she established an advisory and oversight group to supervise the return of on-site learning in further education colleges. (AQT 535/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. I do not have those figures to hand, but I will, of course, write to her with the figures. It is important that education is open and available for our young people and for our further and higher education students. We cannot damage our young people further by closing schools, colleges or universities.

Ms Flynn: I agree with all of that, and I am conscious that it is a really worrying time for students who are trying to continue their education. Is your Department considering whether it can provide additional resources to help with well-being and mental health support, particularly for students who have been impacted directly by COVID-19?

Mrs Dodds: As I said in answer to my previous question, I have been working with the Finance Minister, and, so far, there is a budget of £5.6 million for higher education students. That is available through our universities and, indeed, in some of our further education colleges for our young people. It is a time of great anxiety for young people. We saw throughout the summer how, for many of our young people, that was manifested with their exam results; now, it is manifested in trying to keep teaching going so that those young people can sit exams and be properly rewarded at the end of next year for the work that they have done. It is important that we support those young people going forward.

Post Office Accounts

T6. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has had any discussions with the British Government about the retention of the facility for people to keep their money in the Post Office as opposed to having to open a bank account, given that she will share the concerns about the number of bank branches that are closing, with the impending loss of the ability, particularly for older people, to have a Post Office account. (AQT 536/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is an important issue, and we hear about it as constituency MLAs over and over again. The issue probably should be addressed to the Finance Minister, although I recognise how important it is to many people in our communities. I have had conversations with our main banks in the past number of weeks about how important it is to keep local branches open and functioning so that people can continue to have contact and do transactions as they need to, even during these difficult health situations.

Mrs D Kelly: Thanks for the answer. Minister, in relation to your discussions with the banks, I implore you to put some pressure on them in relation to mortgages and lending. They are seeking to lock the door after the horse has bolted, particularly in relation to dealing with first-time buyers. Have your discussions entered into the realm of the need for a more flexible approach to first-time buyers?

Mrs Dodds: Again, I agree with the Member. It is not specifically my responsibility, but I can opine on this for a moment or two. These are difficult circumstances, and I understand that some mortgage lenders have increased the contribution that they require, particularly from first-time buyers. We need to see the construction sector and the housing market move, and we need to see people able to afford their own home. Were this my area of responsibility, I would encourage the banks to look at the issues with greater flexibility.

Mr Speaker: I call Linda Dillon. You may not have time to ask a supplementary question.

2.45 pm

Excluded: Financial Packages

T7. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for the Economy, albeit that it feels like Groundhog Day in that she has asked the question many times and is yet to get an answer, what measures she plans to put in place for those who have been excluded, given that, potentially, we are about to go in to another lockdown, with the fear that those businesses and people will again be left out of the packages that are in place. (AQT 537/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Actually, as I have answered on previous questions today, I wrote to the First and deputy First Minister on Friday with a full list of those who had not been incorporated in the current Northern Ireland schemes or, more importantly, the national schemes, because many of these schemes are for the national Government to implement. I have outlined this very clearly to the First and deputy First Minister. I will, of course, write to Executive colleagues and the Finance Minister with those details.

Mr Speaker: Members, our time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two while we prepare for the next questions.

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Irish Sea Border Infrastructure: Proposals

1. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why the details of his Department's proposals for Irish Sea border infrastructure at Larne port are not available for public scrutiny. (AQO 863/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): As the Member will be aware, an application for a proposed certificate of lawful use or development (CLUD) was submitted to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council on 15 September 2020. The application was submitted to confirm that the proposed development for the Northern Ireland point of entry at Larne port falls within permitted development rights, as set out in the Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015. Details of the application submitted in respect of Larne port are not in the public domain. Therefore, my officials are assessing this request under Environmental Information Regulations 2004 and will respond in due course.

Mr Allister: It is not only the planning application that the public cannot see, there was a letter from DAERA that the Minister says gave him instructions on these matters. A business plan has also been submitted. None of those are available to the public or MLAs. I understand the desire of the Minister to blame officials and the Department in Westminster to save his unionist conscience. Is he not in danger of becoming the Minister who provides the infrastructure for an Irish Sea border? Is that not what is really happening?

Mr Poots: I am certainly not blaming officials for anything. Officials are doing the job that they are tasked to do, and that is their role. However, if Mr Allister wants to apportion blame for this happening, then he should turn to the Government that he wishes all of Northern Ireland to be governed by, and that is the Westminster Government.

Brandon Lewis says that checks have been in place since the 19th century and that the Government would work to deliver in a way that works for Northern Ireland. The UK Government's view is that they are delivering on that and that there will be checks on sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS). Mr Allister is a keen supporter of moving to rule by a Westminster Government and not having a Government here. This is a solution to an Irish problem being imposed on Northern Ireland by a Westminster Government. We — Mr Allister, the people of Northern Ireland and me — are the people who will suffer as a consequence of that imposed solution. It is not of our making, and no matter what somersaults Mr Allister performs, he will not prove that to be the case because it is not the case.

Mr McGlone: The Minister has led nicely on to my question. What are the implications for the Department, the Executive and wider trade of the infrastructure at Larne

not being ready by the end of what we hope will be the transition period?

Mr Poots: That remains to be seen, because it is not the only thing that will not be ready. I do not believe that the IT system, which is critical and is being led by DEFRA, will be ready either. There are a number of things that will not be ready, so a decision will be taken at that point. I imagine that the European Union, which has indicated how much it loves Northern Ireland, will hardly want to starve the people of Northern Ireland from 1 January.

Mr McAleer: The Minister will be aware that the recent assurance review into the transition programme gave it a status red and said that there was a need for urgent intervention. Given that east-west trade in agri-food and drink is worth in the region of £4 billion a year, what guarantees can he give that systems will be put in place so that unfettered trade can continue from 1 January?

Mr Poots: We have worked closely with the UK Government and indicated to them over and over again that unfettered access is critical. Some people thought that unfettered access was only important for trade between North and South even though it represents a fraction of the trade that takes place between east and west. So, it is hugely unfortunate that people paid attention to those who said that could we have nothing North/South and that it was easier to do everything east-west because there will be a greater distortion on trade as a consequence. The UK Government have made it clear that trade between Northern Ireland and GB will be unfettered, but the EU has not accepted that. The EU needs to back off and accept that if Britain wants to accept goods from Northern Ireland unfettered, it can butt out. Northern Ireland needs to have the most minimal checks possible on goods coming from GB, and the EU needs to ensure that that happens and that the people of Northern Ireland are not hurt as a consequence of the horse-trading deals that it is engaged in.

Mr Beggs: The Minister referred to previous inspections. There were inspections on live animals, but there will be considerably more inspections following the imposition of a regulatory border down the Irish Sea, which is something that his party encouraged. Will he confirm that 12 additional environmental health officers are being recruited? Who will be paying for them? Will they be inspecting products coming to Northern Ireland? What will be the cost implication of that? What will be the cost of delays in getting food onto our supermarket shelves?

Mr Poots: The Member attempts to rewrite history. I ask him to turn to the parliamentary Hansard reports, which record every vote at Westminster, and identify one instance in which the DUP supported anything that he suggested that it has. He will find that he is totally incorrect.

In terms of the people who are employed, £6 million is being provided by Westminster to pay for issues that are over and above capital infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: As Mark Durkan is not in his place, I will move on to Pat Catney.

Food Safety Standards: US Trade Deal

3. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what guarantee he has

sought from the British Government that there will be no change in food safety standards for imported meat and poultry as a result of a trade deal with the United States of America. (AQO 865/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have been very clear that all trade agreements, including one with the United States of America, must uphold the current high standards for food safety in the UK and that all imported products must meet those standards. I have, therefore, written to the DEFRA Secretary of State on the matter and will continue to make representations as the negotiations progress. I have received a response providing reassurance that legal protections for UK standards remain in place and that the UK Government are committed not to compromise on standards in trade agreements.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is his Department aware of an assessment of the impact on Northern Irish producers of the lowering of food safety standards for meat and poultry imported to the GB market, knowing the high standards that we have in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. A couple of issues arise from that. The GB market is hugely important for our produce, taking over 50% of it. It would concern us if produce of a lower standard came in. I have received correspondence from Liz Truss, who is leading on the issue, that they will not take chlorinated chicken or hormone-fed beef. That is their position. I trust that they will stick to that position and that it will not change, but that is a matter for them. We will keep on the pressure that that should not change.

I believe that the consumer is king, and consumers will probably resist the acquisition of such products in the shops. It will then come to the food trade and whether we can maintain the standard there. That is the area that concerns me most. When people go out to a cafe or restaurant, they tend not to ask where the food has come from. If there were a trade agreement that allowed such food to come in, there would be more of a challenge in the food service sector as opposed to the retail trade. Our target must be to ensure that the food that comes in to the United Kingdom beyond Brexit meets the current very high standards in the United Kingdom.

Mr Dickson: Would the Minister eat chlorinated chicken or hormone-infested beef? Is that what he would recommend to his constituents should the United Kingdom lower its food standards?

Mr Poots: It is not what I would recommend, but I have been in America and I assume that I probably ate chlorinated chicken and hormone-fed beef, as has anybody who has been in the United States of America.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister seek to introduce food labelling for all products that are being imported to Northern Ireland to demonstrate that Northern Ireland food is of a much better standard, and, therefore, we can quantify to our consumers that eating Northern Ireland and British food is, in fact, best?

Mr Poots: There already is extensive food labelling, and we continue to engage with the Food Standards Agency on the matter. The Northern Ireland product is already exceptionally high, and it is my desire to have the highest standards of provenance, traceability, animal health,

animal welfare and environmental standards. If we can do that, we can sell brand Northern Ireland food right across not just the UK and Europe but the entire world as the Rolls-Royce of food produce. Consequently, at that stage, cheap imports will be of less concern because the public will know that, if they buy something with brand Northern Ireland on it, they are buying something of the highest standard in every aspect of its production.

Mr O'Dowd: In answer to a previous question, the Minister said that he trusts the current Ministers who are involved in the negotiations. What gives him grounds to trust the officials and Ministers involved in the negotiations around US imports or anything else?

Mr Poots: I think that the Member may have picked up something slightly wrong. I did not mention trust; I mentioned Truss [*Laughter*] who is the Minister negotiating. I do not trust an awful lot of people. I am very cautious about that, so I assure the Member that I do not necessarily trust the people who are negotiating on our behalf, because I have been let down too many times previously. However, I am impressing on them that, post-Brexit, we want the same current high standards.

Waste Disposal: Non-recyclable Goods

4. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in considering the outcome of the consultation on future recycling and separate collection of waste of a household nature in Northern Ireland, whether his Department will review the projected waste disposal processes of non-recyclable goods. (AQO 866/17-22)

3.00 pm

Mr Poots: First, I must state that the best way to deal with our waste is to prevent it being created in the first place. Following the principles of the waste hierarchy, where waste cannot be prevented, resources should be reused; and, where resources cannot be reused, we seek to produce a high quality recycle, which, where possible, is put back into Northern Ireland's economy. After all that, it is, however, inevitable that, for the foreseeable future, some waste will be sent for residual waste treatment, to produce energy from waste or, indeed, to landfill.

The recent consultation is the first stage of the policy development process. It will allow us to consider the views of and evidence from all stakeholders and make informed decisions on the future of recycling and the separate collection of waste. Alongside that, I am also considering the future waste infrastructure needs for Northern Ireland. We need to consider the totality of waste recycling and disposal, as no element can be considered in isolation.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his answer. Waste incinerators have been measured as an expensive method of generating energy and handling waste. Will the Minister give the House his Department's assessment of the economic burden that the proposed Hightown incinerator would have on local councils and their environmental services' capacity?

Mr Poots: Arc21 has negotiated for energy from waste in the form of incineration. The cost of construction would be well in excess of £200 million, and there would be running costs thereafter. Arc21 is making the argument that, financially, that stacks up.

First, when it comes to waste, our number-one aim is to reduce the amount that is produced in the first instance, particularly the amount of plastic waste. We will work to ensure that that is the case. Secondly, we want further recycling. Back in 2010, when I was Environment Minister, the Department brought out a policy indicating that we wanted to achieve 50% recycling rates by 2020. That was against the background of Belfast and, at that time, Derry City Council having recycling rate percentages in the low twenties. Some of the other councils had percentages in the higher twenties. We achieved that 50%.

Now, going forward to 2035 — sorry to have my back to you, Mr Speaker — we are looking to achieve 65%. That will be in UK legislation. I would like, if possible, to push it to 70%. Then, you have the waste that is left thereafter. I do not want to impinge on any decisions that might be made. However, it is important that whatever decision is made takes into account our first priority, which is to recycle as much waste as possible, and that we leave as little as possible of that residual waste for refuse-derived fuel (RDF). It is important that we ensure that we absolutely minimise the waste that goes into that sector.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I was going to ask him about new recycling targets. I am glad that he said that he plans to have a target of 65%. The Minister said that reducing waste was the most important aspect of that. He also said that the Department was doing work on plastics. Given that he has answered the question that I was going to ask, will he give the House some detail on that work?

Mr Poots: We hope to bring forward something on that as time goes on. There is an evident need to reduce the amount of plastic that goes into the system. We have engaged with the sector to look at how we can further reduce that. One measure that we are looking at is a deposit regime whereby plastics that are sold in the system — for example, plastics for soft drinks — will come back and be recycled. We are also looking at the whole area of packaging and how to reduce the amount of plastic that goes into it. We are working with businesses and companies and hearing from them how they can develop alternatives. People are looking at a series of alternative packaging products out there — one that is made from eucalyptus, for example — that do considerably less damage to the environment and are serious alternatives to what exists currently.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his answer so far. Referring to Mr Blair's question, when does the Minister expect to bring forward new policies that are informed by the responses to the consultation?

Mr Poots: A lot of policy is being set at the minute. We hope to do consultations on a series of programmes over the next number of months. Work has been done with us on part of the waste recycling legislation that is going through Westminster, and a legally binding target of 65% for recycling is going into that legislation. I was not happy, as I wanted the target to go to 70%. We can still have a target of 70%, but it will be 65% in the Westminster legislation.

We will continue to work towards achieving the highest rates possible, and we believe they are achievable. It is important. Some people questioned whether the 50% rate was achievable 10 years ago. We did that. Some people

thought that it would be a struggle for us to reach a 20% renewable energy target 10 years ago, but we doubled it to over 40%. Given the hunger in the industry to do the right thing, I believe that the 70% target is achievable and that the public will respond to it.

Supply Chains: Post-Brexit

5. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his Department's work to ensure that essential resources and infrastructure are in place to guarantee minimum disruption to supply chains at the end of the transition period. (AQO 867/17-22)

Mr Poots: In common with the UK Government, I am clear that the Northern Ireland protocol needs to be implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of agri-food trade and does not increase costs for our businesses and people living in Northern Ireland. I am working on the assumption that, if the EU and United Kingdom Government are committed to minimising friction on trade, it is reasonable to assume there will be a very small number of checks. My officials are working to minimise the need for infrastructure as the SPS operational programme delivery is progressed.

The following details will provide a brief update. A business case for the necessary work, which includes building work, additional staff and IT functions, has been forwarded by officials to the Department of Finance and Her Majesty's Treasury. Funding of some £43 million has been secured, of which £37 million relates to capital expenditure. A further £6 million will also be required for recruiting, training and employing additional personnel and for programme implementation costs.

As you know, the proposed CLUD applications have been submitted to all the relevant councils for development at the proposed points of entry for Northern Ireland seaports. That includes applications to Derry City and Strabane District Council; Newry, Mourne and Down District Council; Belfast City Council; and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. The applications seek to confirm that the proposed developments fall within permitted development rights as set out in the Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015. No determinations have been received to date.

The team has initiated the tender process for the design-and-build phase for the required inspection facilities in line with the programme procurement strategy, which was agreed with the Department of Finance. The contract award letters for the design and build of the proposed inspection facilities at Warrenpoint, Larne and Belfast harbours were issued to the successful contractors on 7 October 2020. Meetings with the successful contractors will follow in the coming weeks in order to agree the delivery timelines for the design-and-build programme of works.

Work also continues with initial ground survey work that is being undertaken for each of the seaport sites at Belfast harbour, Larne port, Warrenpoint Port and Foyle Port in order to inform the forthcoming detailed design process. Over the coming months, in order to ensure that businesses are kept up to date, a communication and engagement plan will be implemented. That will include a series of stakeholder engagement sessions to guide

traders step by step through the journey from GB to Northern Ireland.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire as an fhreagra sin. The Minister answered the part of my question about engagement with ports and ferries, but what engagement is his Department having with the haulage industry in order to minimise the disruption before the end of the transition period?

Mr Poots: As I indicated in the tail of my answer, we will be engaging extensively with industry. We will communicate with the industry about the engagement plan and on how it will be implemented. There are still ongoing negotiations between the UK and the EU; therefore, some of the issues are still outstanding. It is important that the haulage industry is allowed to function as smoothly and seamlessly as possible. In everything that we set out to do, we will seek to ensure that things that are currently seamless remain as seamless as possible in the new scenario.

Ms S Bradley: From the Minister's answer, it is fair to say that delays in our supply chain are an inevitable outcome of Brexit. He mentioned stakeholder engagements. I have spoken to hauliers who are still very much in the dark. They do not know what systems they need to invest in and what the costs will be. Can the Minister throw any light on that?

Mr Poots: The Member is half right: if delays are to happen, they will happen as a result of the protocol — the protocol for which people cried out — not Brexit. People said that the protocol was wonderful, but then, all of a sudden, they realised that it was not so wonderful.

I recognise that the haulage sector needs more information than it has. I am not in a position to give it that information at this time, because of the ongoing negotiations. The Minister who has responsibility for haulage is the Minister for Infrastructure. I welcome the fact that, after months and months and months, we are looking at a scheme that will support the haulage industry. The industry kept going throughout COVID in very difficult circumstances, and the scheme was delayed, and delayed further, because no Minister would take it on. I welcome the fact that the Infrastructure Minister is now doing that.

Mr Butler: Has the Minister had discussions with his counterparts in London about protections that will be given to ensure that NI goods do not face competitive disadvantage or discrimination in the GB market after Brexit?

Mr Poots: Yes, that has been extensive. There is an extensive paper trail of letters going back and forward. I have engaged at every session of the interministerial group and, directly, with my counterparts in the UK Government. There has been extensive engagement. Throughout that engagement, the UK Government have maintained that there should be unfettered access between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. I would like to see unfettered access both ways, and I have fought and argued for that. Unfortunately, the protocol militates against that, but we should have unfettered access for goods going from Northern Ireland to Great Britain.

I will add a caveat. Northern Ireland cannot become a back door for goods coming from other places, entering the Republic of Ireland and ending up in the Great Britain market. We would become almost like what Albania was

at one stage in Europe, when it was a place to which goods could come in and be transited to other places. We need to ensure that the integrity of our food system is retained. For that reason, I am fighting the suggested six months' free-for-all, which the UK Government seem to be inclined to go to. I trust that all in the Executive will adopt the same position and that it will become clear to the UK Government that we need to ensure that there are no back-door opportunities through Northern Ireland for goods that will be of a lesser standard.

Rural Communities: Funding Programmes

6. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what funding programmes are in place to assist rural communities. (AQO 868/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department currently supports a range of funding programmes that assist rural communities. This year, the Northern Ireland rural development programme 2014-2020 funded LEADER and rural tourism schemes that will make available £11 million to support investment in rural businesses, villages and basic services. The Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme will provide £10 million, this year, across 20 initiatives that aim to tackle social isolation, access and financial poverty, as well as support COVID-19 recovery in rural communities. A further £2.5 million is available to support pilot projects that address rural issues emerging from the draft rural policy framework and the need to respond to COVID-19. DAERA also continues to monitor and support the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 by Departments, public bodies and councils. It provides an effective mechanism in supporting the delivery of positive and meaningful benefits for rural dwellers.

3.15 pm

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his answer. For some of the programmes, the process can be awfully complex and difficult, which in some cases it needs to be. Will he look into what he can do to remove the red tape, which can cause fairly long delays in getting funding from some of those programmes?

Mr Poots: My officials have reviewed some of the processes around the current programme and have started to revise certain procedures to reduce red tape and make the application process more efficient, within the context of 'Managing Public Money' and the audit responsibilities that come with that. It is something that I continue to drive home to them. There is a necessity to make things as practical as possible so that people can provide all the information that needs to be provided, without wading through 40 pages of documentation, in order to draw down relatively small amounts of money in some instances.

Ms Sheerin: As a consequence of Brexit, we are losing the rural development programme that you mentioned. What has the Department planned to replace it, and how will it be funded, given that the substantial bulk of its funding came from the EU?

Mr Poots: The funding that you refer to will be replacement funding directly from the UK Government. That will be the source of future funding for rural communities.

Mr Speaker: I call Trevor Clarke. You may not get a supplementary question, Trevor.

Landfill

7. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline how his Department is working with local councils to assist them in diverting waste away from landfill. (AQO 869/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has a long history of working with local councils to help them make sure that as many of our resources as possible are diverted from landfill. By following the principles of the waste hierarchy, DAERA has undertaken a number of initiatives involving local councils to prevent waste from being generated in the first instance, as part of the waste prevention programme. Reuse projects have also been provided with funding, notably the newly launched Northern Ireland Resources Network, which brings together a range of stakeholders, including local councils, to provide support and guidance in promoting reuse and repair.

Since the introduction of the Food Waste Regulations 2015, over one million tons of biodegradable waste have been diverted from landfill. Separate collection of food waste has also positively impacted on the levels and quality of waste recycling.

As a result of collaborative working between my Department and councils, Northern Ireland has reached, ahead of schedule, the EU and Northern Ireland waste management strategy recycling target of 50%. Building on that success, the current £23 million household waste recycling collaborative change programme financially supports councils to increase recycling rates further, improve the quality of recycling and reduce reliance on landfill. That financial support has been accompanied by my Department's work alongside the Northern Ireland national communications action plan, which has resulted in a common approach being taken to communications and behavioural change campaigns in Northern Ireland, ensuring that that important recycling messaging is delivered to all residents. That has all yielded very positive results, but my Department will continue to build on them.

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

EU Funding Replacement

T1. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on securing a replacement for European Union funding. (AQT 511/17-22)

Mr Poots: Considerable work has been going on. The UK Government will be providing replacement funding. It has been indicated throughout — through the Conservative Party manifesto — that they will supply the same funding as is currently supplied. It is for us to hold them to that and ensure that that is the case. That has been the case. COVID-19, however, is inflicting huge damage on the Treasury. The cost to the Treasury is mounting all the time, so there are significant pressures. One can never be absolutely sure, so we always need to be acutely aware of those things.

Mr Gildernew: Given that uncertainty, what assurances can the Minister give that the replacement funding will be secured?

Mr Poots: Had we been in the European Union, we would have no guarantees of having the same funding as previously. EU countries are going into a round of negotiations, and, in that, accession countries, which were treated less favourably than existing EU countries, will be treated the same.

That means either that Governments who face the same troubles as the UK Government face in supporting their country through COVID-19 will have to invest more or, indeed, that the cake will be made smaller and each country will have less money to give to their people. There are no guarantees in any of this, but we have a commitment, made in the Government's manifesto, that they will maintain current spending, and we will seek to hold them to that.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful

T2. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to join with him in congratulating the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council parks' team on achieving six green flags today from Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, with awards also going to the Bells Lane allotments, Lisburn BMX Club, Billy Neill MBE Country Park, Moat Park, Moira Demesne, Wallace Park and the very beautiful Castle Gardens, the well-known green space above us, for their high-quality green spaces. (AQT 512/17-22)

Mr Poots: I remember, when I was on the council — Mr Butler would have been young at the time, and I suppose that I was relatively young at that stage — helping to secure funding for the Castle Gardens project. It is a fantastic project. The Lisburn and Castlereagh parks team have been exemplary over the years. Some of their floral tributes have been recognised at a national and, indeed, an international level. The parks team are excellent, and I thank the Member for raising the issue. It demonstrates the importance of our local government sector and the high-quality work that is carried out not just by Lisburn and Castlereagh council but by many councils across Northern Ireland.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer and, in particular, his support for financing such projects when he was on Lisburn City Council. Can he give a further commitment that groups such as Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and the councils will be supported financially by his Department to continue their good work?

Mr Poots: Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful has an important role. I worked extensively with it previously, and I am happy to work with it once again. We have a beautiful country in so many ways. We have the most wonderful coastlines and superb mountain ranges. Northern Ireland changes all the time. In County Down, there are so many different things: it does not matter whether you are in and around Rostrevor, Warrenpoint and the beauty down in Carlingford or whether you are in Strangford or, indeed, Slieve Croob. You could go over that for the various counties. Given the beautiful landscape that we have, it is important that we as human beings do as little as possible to spoil it. One way of helping to keep the beauty of our country is to ensure that we keep things tidy and do not throw litter and that we have a regime that picks it up. I will say this: some people really need to learn to take their litter

and waste home with them. If it was not there when they arrived, it should not be there when they leave.

Supertrawlers

T3. **Ms Rogan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures he has put in place to effectively monitor supertrawlers that enter our waters, given that a recent report from Greenpeace showed that they massively stepped up their activities during the pandemic lockdown. (AQT 513/17-22)

Mr Poots: Well, they should not be entering our waters. In most instances, it is our fishing boats and, indeed, Irish fishing boats that are out there. Supertrawlers tend not to come into the Irish Box so much because of the nature of the fishing. There are more nephrops there, and it does not lend itself to the supertrawlers that exist on the west of Ireland, for example, or in the North Sea. I should say that exiting the European Union will assist us in this, in that the waters will be ours and therefore the fishing will be dispensed by our Government and the Administration here. The 20% that was left to France was not utilised, but they took it off our fishermen anyway. The EU generously allowed French fishermen to come to Northern Ireland, but that will no longer be available, which, I think, we will all view positively.

Ms Rogan: Given the Minister's contribution during the recent Fisheries Bill debate on the damage caused by supertrawlers, will he now commit to doing all in his power to see supertrawlers banned from our waters?

Mr Poots: As I indicated, supertrawlers will not fish extensively in the Irish Sea. We are not responsible for the area in which they operate extensively, which is off the west coast of Ireland, in the North Sea and in the Bay of Biscay. For some reason, under the cod recovery programme. Northern Ireland fishermen could not fish for cod in the Irish Sea save for a very limited tonnage. Cod naturally progress north to south, and the French and Spanish supertrawlers waited in the Bay of Biscay to catch considerable amounts of cod. Let us be sensible about these things: there has not been a cod recovery programme, because of the boats in the Celtic Sea and the Bay of Biscay. It is important, as we go forward, that we have much better and much more practical solutions that aid the fishermen in South Down, in the main, and in Strangford, who are trying to make a living in those waters in difficult circumstances.

Glenelly Valley: Landslides

T4. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his thinking in relation to a support scheme for the farm families that are still carrying the burden of the severe landslides in August 2017 that devastated the Glenelly valley and other parts of the Sperrins and their hinterland. (AQT 514/17-22)

Mr Poots: I recognise the desperately difficult circumstances that the people in Glenelly found themselves in as a consequence of the flooding that took place, resulting in landslides and damage to their land. The debris had to be cleared with diggers, and fences were taken out. I have spoken to my officials on the matter. As I have indicated before, I will have to take a ministerial direction on the matter, but I want officials to do as much work as possible so that, if I choose to go down the

support route, the case will be as robust as we can make it.

Mr McAleer: I am glad that the Minister is still deliberating on the issue. I cannot emphasise enough the depth of feeling of the farmers in the region. On the night of that flooding, farmers in Inishowen were similarly affected, but they received their funding some years ago. I encourage the Minister to conclude his deliberations and look in a positive light at supporting those farmers at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Poots: Some support has been offered, but I understand that the farmers believe that something more significant is needed. We need to bring those deliberations to a conclusion one way or the other.

Traffic Blockages: Post-Brexit Ports

T6. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the measures at Larne for the protection of animals and the like, whether he foresees any blockages at the Scottish side in the flow of traffic. (AQT 516/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Scots have made it clear that they do not want there to be any blockages. They do not want to have any infrastructure at their harbours. However, there may be potential blockages between Dublin and Holyhead. A lot of food goes from Northern Ireland through that route and ends up in the GB market. I want to see a dedicated Northern Ireland lane at Dublin harbour, and I hope that, when it comes to it, Dublin will do the decent thing, as good neighbours, to help to facilitate that trade to continue as well as the support for their ports that comes from businesses here. I have also spoken to my Welsh counterparts to ensure that lorries that travel from GB to Northern Ireland via Holyhead will have immediate access to the boat rather than having to wait in the queue with everybody else.

3.30 pm

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his answer. That issue was raised by representatives of the ports who presented to the Committee last Thursday. Have the Minister or Department done a scoping exercise of the ports to see where there might be problems as we work through the Brexit issues?

Mr Poots: I have made it clear, certainly for the Northern Ireland ports, that we are not to have any blockages. That is something that we have fought for. Provided that the European Union does not behave in a difficult way, most people in Northern Ireland will not notice any checks that are happening because it will, perhaps, be one lorry per boat that is checked. That check should last for about an hour, so it should not have a significant impact.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment until we change the Chamber arrangements for the next item.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Education

Mr Speaker: Ms Karen Mullan has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Education. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

CCEA Proposals

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to address concerns in relation to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's (CCEA) proposals on the delivery of the curriculum and qualifications for this academic year.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for her question. This has been a stressful time for schools and pupils anxious for clarity on the examination process this year. However, it took time for the ramifications of the full suite of proposals, some of which have been accepted, to be felt, to consider the views of a wide range of stakeholders, to liaise with other jurisdictions, and then make decisions that are in the best interests of all. As I confirmed on Friday, my priority is to ensure that public examinations can go ahead in this academic year if at all possible. They are the most valid and reliable measure of educational outcomes, and it is important that young people are given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through the examination process.

The decisions that I announced take into account the disruption that there has been to date as well as the potential for further disruption during this academic year. They go significantly further in adjustments and mitigations than in England and Wales, while ensuring that they remain robust, valid, comparable and portable. They will alleviate the burden of assessments on young people while providing as much opportunity as possible to cover the subject specifications, which are important for progression.

The changes are designed to ensure that young people are supported and that their well-being is prioritised. I hope that the clarity provided will give young people the confidence to enable them to complete their qualifications and progress to the next stage of education or employment.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber. However, I want to express my disappointment that he did not bring those proposals to the Assembly.

We all want schools to remain open. As a parent of a year 12 pupil who is on her third absence, I am acutely aware that her educational needs are best met in the classroom, as are her mental health and well-being needs. That said, schools must be supported to do so. The largest all-girl post-primary school in my city has closed for this week, with large numbers of pupils and staff in other schools also absent. Minister, in these proposals, I and others do not see meaningful recognition of this prolonged disruption

to education. What contingency plans are you and CCEA putting in place?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her remarks. On timescale, a range of consultations took place involving the stakeholder group and the trade unions, and obviously there were discussions with CCEA. There was discussion at a number of levels with the other nations of the UK, particularly with England and Wales on GCSEs; that took place on Thursday. That was last piece of the jigsaw. I wanted to make sure that the information went to schools as quickly as possible after that. It was released to schools on Friday morning.

I take on board the Member's comments about disruption and about school being the best place for children to receive their education on a face-to-face basis. I hope that the Member will join me in urging the Executive, when they take decisions on what restrictions to put in place, to give schools priority so that they remain open throughout.

I felt that it was important to get the information out, particularly curriculum issues. There are a number of mitigations, particularly on assessment units, optionality and timing. We have made sure that this is compatible with the timing of examinations outside of CCEA. CCEA has been tasked to draw up a range of contingency plan options, and I await that information. It is not simply a question of a single contingency. A range of things could happen in May and June, the most likely being that, while exams will go ahead, certain individuals will not be able to do specific exams. I will wait for CCEA's options before making a further announcement.

Mr Lyttle: Does the Minister accept the criticism that, with this approach, he has prioritised an examinations system over the well-being of students? How many teachers and pupils are currently absent due to COVID? What level of absence would be necessary to move to teacher-assessed grades for 2020-21?

Mr Weir: As I indicated, a range of contingency plans will be put in place. The reality is that examinations must be the first option. Examinations must be regarded as the best option because they are objective in nature. If we have learned one lesson in 2020, it is that, ultimately, subjective opinions from centre-assessed grades or a mathematical formula based on previous data are all second best to a rigorous examination system.

If we are looking after our pupils' well-being, it is also critical that they are able to progress on a robust basis. Take A levels: it is clear that other jurisdictions will be doing A levels by way of examination. Other Ministers have come to the same conclusion and position as I have. If Northern Ireland went on some form of solo run and detached ourselves from the examination process elsewhere, that would have a detrimental impact on our pupils. It would make it more difficult for them to attain university places or compete for jobs on a level playing field. Therefore, in looking after the long-term well-being of our pupils, we have put examinations as the first option. As indicated, contingency plans will be required if, because of health circumstances, exams are unable to carry on in a full fashion.

Mr Butler: Given the scale of interest in and input to the pre-paper consultation, I see no equity across subjects. I do not see any impact assessment for those whom these measures may affect most. How many of the post-

consultation CCEA recommendations made it into the Department's final paper?

Mr Weir: A distinction was put in place in a few areas. Adjustments were made, for instance, to English language, which made it compatible with other languages. That was principally on the grounds of health considerations. I appreciate that there is no perfect alternative to speaking and listening. However, the general position was to ensure that certain assessment units could be removed to try to lessen the burden of assessment. It means that, in practical terms, a student who is doing an examination will face slimmed-down content. Speaking and listening posed the greatest difficulty from a health point of view. There would be an impact on some other subjects, such as those that involve certain practical lab tests.

One of the other areas has been to say to CCEA that optionality needs to be explored. There is a strong belief amongst schools in optionality, and it is one that I share. CCEA did not include that as part of its final submission. Optionality would give greater opportunities to pupils, and it needs to be taken into account to give some choice to students who are doing their final exam. It would also give protection to schools as they work through a range of subjects on the curriculum.

Mr Newton: Minister, recognising that these are extremely difficult days of the pandemic, will you comment on what progress Northern Ireland has made compared with the other jurisdictions of the UK and, perhaps, the Republic of Ireland?

Mr Weir: Directly speaking, there are a couple of things to point out. A lot of jurisdictions found themselves in a similar position, particularly with the timing of announcements. In an ideal world, we would like to have made announcements at a much earlier stage. Scotland announced what it was doing two days ahead of us, England announced subsequently, and Wales will probably announce the position for 2020-21 at the end of this month. It is about trying to get a balance and have that discussion. I do not believe — I stand to be corrected — that the Republic has made an announcement on its leaving certificate for this year.

As we are in a competitive market with those other jurisdictions, it is also important to note that all the considerations in those jurisdictions, particularly of COVID restrictions, are predicated upon schools remaining open. For instance, I note that, this morning, the Health Minister in the Republic of Ireland announced that it is his view that schools will not have any form of extended half-term break and that the key focus is ensuring that education is delivered to all. That is particularly pertinent to those doing public examinations, because they will be in competition with students from a range of other jurisdictions for the likes of university places and future employment.

Dr Archibald: Minister, in relation to GCSEs, as my colleague from Foyle outlined, this term has seen varying degrees of disruption across schools due to COVID, and, for many students, that will exacerbate the impact of last term's closures. There is concern that the proposed unit reduction for GCSEs will be somewhat meaningless as it will be a unit that is covered in year 11. What further measures have you or CCEA considered to take account of that and to make up for lost teaching time?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. There is a range of measures. For example, the assessment of at least one unit can be reduced. Indeed, assessment can be reduced by up to 40% for most subjects. On English language, which is particularly important, the position taken, which was different from that of CCEA, enabled, effectively, a 20% reduction in English language assessment. The only GCSE unit that is not directly reduced — it is the same, I think, in other jurisdictions — is mathematics, which, probably more than any other subject, is progressive as it moves to A level. There was a concern that any reduction in mathematics would disadvantage students as they moved on to A level.

3.45 pm

As indicated, we also asked CCEA to look at optionality for GCSEs and A levels, which will widen the choice for students. As part of that, while I appreciate that there has been some constraint in Northern Ireland because of our traditional holidays in July and August, we have been able to push things back a little bit in order to ensure that GCSE and A-level examinations will, effectively, begin and end a week later than they normally would. We have worked with other jurisdictions to try to make sure that where students have examination timetables from other awarding bodies, those examinations are made compatible with that.

The Executive have also supported direct intervention. Initially, there were some initiatives over the summer, but we also have the Engage programme, which has £11.2 million. That has been distributed to schools, and they have been given freedom under it. It has been particularly focused at and advantage has been given to schools with higher levels of social disadvantage and above-average levels of free school meals. Funding has also been made available to all schools, including special schools, to try to ensure educational catch-up.

None of those things is perfect, but, collectively, we are trying to do all that we can to bridge the gap between where we are and where, ideally, all of us would like to be.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, the gross mishandling of the awarding of grades this year has been described as nothing short of shambolic. Will the Minister assure the House that lessons have been learned, and will he update the Assembly on when the independent review of CCEA will begin and who will be on the panel?

Mr Weir: We have sought tenders from outside bodies and have reached the point where I have signed off on a tender. Given that there is still a slight level of commercial sensitivity, I will make an announcement on that soon. The organisation has no direct connection with the Department or Government, and there will be a direct contract. We have reached the point of submitting the business case to the Department of Finance. Once it has cleared that hurdle, the work can begin. Once that has started, I anticipate that, roughly, the panel will have a six-week timetable for examining precisely what happened in 2020, what lessons can be learned and what actions can be correspondingly incorporated if any are to be taken at any point in the future.

Mr Beggs: CCEA announced adjustments to the curriculum in some areas, but, in others, final confirmation is still to be given to teachers. When will all teachers be aware of the final curriculum for their subjects so that they

know what to teach their students and what they will be examined on?

Mr Weir: I hope that the detail will be there very soon for any remaining subjects. I should point out that CCEA did a consultation, got responses and produced proposals, but adjustments were made to them by the Department and me and were announced on Friday. CCEA is dealing with, if you like, the outworkings of that announcement. Some subjects fit very easily into particular adjustments, but others will take a little more time. Consequently, we will work through those in order to get them finalised for every subject very shortly.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, what would you say to young people who worked very hard to achieve their AS-level grades and who will now not see those grades included as part of their overall A-level results? You said previously that incorporating those grades as part of the overall grades would be very different from the approach in England and Wales. Why will you not put our students first and recognise their hard work?

Mr Weir: We have to have comparability and portability. With A levels probably more than any other qualification, anyone from here is competing with those in a range of other jurisdictions, particularly for university places, so our A levels have to be seen to be as robust as possible. The fact that we have reached a position in which AS levels and A levels are comparable across all jurisdictions that do A levels is important. We in Northern Ireland like to think of it as a special place. In many ways it is, and I am sure that we all glory in our homeland, but, when it comes to qualifications, we cannot go on a solo run.

A grade has been attributed for AS levels. In previous years, the position was that, effectively, that grade represented a particular mark and you could get 40%. Mathematically, you can get 40% of 65%, but you cannot get 40% of a B and then try to marry that with an examination system that gives a grade. It is not so much that you are comparing apples and oranges; you are comparing apples and orange juice, if I may use that analogy. Given the robustness of the decision, that should be avoided. To marry in some level of assessment with an actual grade that is produced by an examination, again, is not comparing like with like.

We have to be fair to everybody. We have to ensure that those who qualify in 2021 will be regarded by future employers and universities as having something that is robust and that there is no question mark over their examination. That is why it is important that the integrity of our A levels — indeed, of all our qualifications — is as robust as possible.

Mrs Barton: My question is about BTEC qualifications. BTEC qualifications are quite often compared to A levels. Has any thought been given to work being done on them?

Mr Weir: I think that there will be a bit of liaison with that. As technical qualifications, BTEC qualifications fall under the Department for the Economy's remit. Given the fact that, to some extent, a template has been set, I think that my colleague Diane Dodds will want to ensure that BTEC qualifications are in line with the qualifications that come through the Department of Education.

Mr M Bradley: I expect a reduction in the curriculum, but can the Minister give as early an indication as possible to

teachers so that they can be prepared and clear on how to best prepare children for examinations? Will CCEA be more properly prepared for examinations than it was last term? Will there be test runs to ensure a smooth outcome that will benefit everyone — schools, teachers, parents and pupils?

Mr Weir: The Member makes a very valid point. Last year, we had a situation in which, across different jurisdictions and because of the level of uncertainty of COVID and the timescales, there clearly was not time to trial the actions that were taken. We will see what emerges from the independent examination of that. This year, we do, at least, have the opportunity to be able to test it out, where we can, with contingency arrangements, ahead of May and June.

As indicated, it is also the case that there will be a slimming down of the content in the curriculum that is assessed. As I said, there is no perfect solution to this, but it will at least enable a certain amount of cognisance to be taken of the level of disruption that there has been for pupils.

Mr McNulty: Minister, are you confident that these proposals will facilitate an assessment that will be a true reflection of students' ability? Can you outline how the proposals will impact on languages such as Irish, Spanish and French?

Mr Weir: I will avoid the temptation — it is beyond my ability — to answer the Member's question bilingually.

Yes, I am confident that this is the best possible route. As indicated, contingency plans will be put in place. We have tried to take, broadly speaking, a similar approach on a range of the language subjects, whether that be Irish, English, French, Spanish etc. That is, largely speaking, derived from a need, in a common way, to have a reduced level of content assessment to take account of the disruption. It is also the case that the information that we got — I appreciate that this will not be perfect for every student — was that an assessment of speaking and listening, which is what we effectively might describe as the "oral element", was the element that, potentially, may be most at risk, from a health point of view. A consistent approach has been taken across languages to reduce that level of content, and that, therefore, is something that is very clear *[Inaudible.]* It is not perfect, and, if we were in a COVID-free situation, a range of these measures would simply not be considered. However, I think that we have to marry in the educational and academic situation with trying to be fair to all students, while taking into account the health implications.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes this item of business on the question to the Minister of Education for urgent oral answer. I invite Members to take their ease until we return, in just a moment, to the debate on the health protection regulations.

Executive Committee Business

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Mr Speaker: Members, we will resume the sitting. We were in the midst of the Minister making his winding-up speech on the motion. Minister, please continue.

Mr Swann: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will now refer to Members' comments, beginning with the Deputy Chair of the Committee's. She rightly pointed out that we have to get ahead of the virus. A line that has been used many times is this: the virus does not spread itself; it is our actions that spread it. Every recommendation from and every step taken by the Executive or the Department of Health is therefore about breaking those infection chains. Members have referred to this, but when these regulations came in, the majority of our transmissions were in households. That has now changed to community settings, so our reaction has to be to move with the virus.

It is often said, and it is a phrase that the Deputy Chair of the Committee used, that we have to learn how to live with this virus. We learn to live with the virus by following the guidance and restrictions that the Executive bring in. That is how we make sure that people live with the virus and do not die from it. The message that she relayed to those spreaders — the people who do not care — was this: "Stop it and wise up". I thank her for that blunt message, because it is what is needed to get through to that very small minority who think that they are above this virus, immune to it or just do not care. That is the bit that worries me.

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

Her specific question was about what the Department and the trusts have done to prepare for the second surge.

She will recall the debate that we had last week, where I brought forward our winter surge plans and paused our rebuilding programme, because we had an indication at that stage that we would have to look at steps to protect a service that is already fragile and to support a workforce that is already under pressure, but still provide the essential services that we see as core to our health service. The surge plans across trusts show how we can do that, but it is all dependent on how many COVID inpatients and ICU patients we actually end up with. Every step that we take that reduces the number of inpatients and ICU patients means that we can do that bit more that is in our surge plan in the normal running of things.

4.00 pm

I said before in this place that, when Bengoa started, we were asked to run a health service and a transformation service. Recently, we have been running a health service, a transformation service and a COVID service. The more pressure that comes on our general services, the less that we can do on the first two. Sinead McLaughlin referred

to the specifics around the Derry City and Strabane council area and how others could learn from that. One of the things that we saw when the additional restrictions went into the Derry City and Strabane council area was a reaction from elected representatives in Newry, Mourne and Down, and Mid Ulster and in other council areas, who really stepped up their messaging to the general public.

One of the issues that she raised — again, it is a concern of mine — was the anti-mask rally that was held in the Guildhall, where that group spoke against masks, vaccines and regulations. There is one thing that I think everyone who attended that rally has in common with all of us: they expect the health service to be there for them. While they rail against it, while they attack the regulations, while they attack the guidance that is coming out from our scientific advisers and the heartfelt pleas from our nurses, our doctors and anybody in the health service who is asking people to follow the regulations, they still expect those people, at the end of the day, to be there to make them better, should they contract COVID or anything else.

Mr Chambers spoke about how we compared, or could compare, areas across Northern Ireland. I have heard that on the media this morning. What I will say to the Member is to compare where we were on 27 September to the present day — roughly 14 days. In the Antrim and Newtownabbey council area, positive cases have increased fivefold. In Ards and North Down, they have increased fourfold. In the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon council area, they have increased threefold. In Belfast, they are up fourfold. In Causeway Coast and Glens, they are up sixfold. In Derry and Strabane, they are up fivefold. In Fermanagh and Omagh, they are up fourfold. In Lisburn and Castlereagh, they are up fourfold. In Mid Ulster, they are up fourfold, and in Newry, Mourne and Down, they are up fourfold.

People try to say that their area is not as bad as Derry City and Strabane, but being the best of a bad lot is not a good place to be. In fact, the Mid and East Antrim council area, which is partly in my constituency and partly in Mr Allister's, is now the lowest. We look at that and hold it up and go, "Mid and East Antrim is now low". It is at 83·7, according to yesterday's figures. That was when we brought in the initial measures in the Ballymena BT43 and Belfast areas. When the regulations that we are debating today were actually brought in, Mid and East Antrim was lower than it is today. It is in a good place, because it is the lowest of our council areas, but that does not mean that it is doing the best that it can, because we have so much to do across the entirety.

One of the challenges that we have when we talk about our council areas and then try to compare them with council areas in the Republic of Ireland and England is that we are talking about a population of 1·8 million or 1·9 million, which is smaller than Manchester. When we hear of restrictions being brought in in Manchester, we try to compare that with what is being done in Derry City and Strabane, when the scale, complexity and number of people involved are not a direct comparison. It is about how we get our messaging right to reflect that as well.

Mr Chambers also asked about time. Time is critical. Every day counts. As I said in my opening remarks, we are looking at a seven-day doubling of cases and hospitalisations. We also see other indicators, such as

increasing positive cases among our over-60s. Every day counts when it comes to bringing in additional steps.

Ms Bradshaw mentioned Executive messaging about these regulations back in September. I do not have a detailed account of what the First Minister and deputy First Minister said in the press conference that day, but I will refer her comments to the Executive Office and the Executive information service to see where they fall.

One of the most critical points in our contact-tracing system is the information that the individuals whom it contacts give to it. The more information that our contact tracers get from people who have tested positive, the more that it helps us to shape the data that we have and the understanding of where we see the virus going. On Friday, the contact-tracing service moved to an online offering as well. When someone receives a positive result, they will receive a text message and a link to a specific website, where people can enter their details and contacts. That is to try to enhance and speed up the transfer of information. It is about utilising modern technology in the work that we want to do. One of the things that makes our contact-tracing service unique in comparison with some of the others is that we still hold it in-house. It is not operated by a private or for-profit organisation; it is run within the confines of the Public Health Agency.

Ms Bradshaw also asked why we did not include the Derry City and Strabane or Newry and Mourne council areas when we brought in the regulations on 21 September. The reason was that they were in a very different place back on 21 September; they had among the lowest infection rates in Northern Ireland. What we did at that time was proportionate to where we were; we then moved to increase the regulations from ones that covered postcodes to ones that covered the entirety of Northern Ireland.

I share Mr Easton's concerns about everything that he raised, from the pace of change and what we have seen in the past seven and 14 days, to the trajectory that we are on. That is why we are saying that we need to make the interventions. He expressed his annoyance at the message that was put out this morning because it undermines the general health message. I agree, but I will not get involved because we still have work to do to try to get out a united message from our Executive and the House about what needs to be done.

Mr Easton also indicated concerns about testing. We have continued to access pillar 2 testing and have enhanced our testing in pillar 1; in the past couple of days, we have hit more than 10,000 tests per day. We need to ensure that our public dashboard shows the number of tests per day, the number of people tested and the number of positive tests. There is a specific indicator for the number of people who have been tested for the first time. There is further information on the dashboard that shows everybody who has had repeated tests and how the positivity rate ties in to the percentage of positive tests and the number of successfully completed tests. That is information that needs to be clarified.

Mr Easton has continually raised one of the most salient questions since I came into post and this place was reestablished: do we have enough nurses, whether through recruitment of international nurses or local recruitment processes? The answer is no. We did not have enough nurses in March, we did not have enough in

January and we do not have enough now. The more the virus spreads in the community, the more that our health staff, including nurses, are at risk of contracting it, no matter what precautions are taken. That is the challenge that we face when we look to support the patients with COVID while trying to maintain the service that needs to be provided. Those are some of the challenges and changes.

It goes back to the points made by Mrs Cameron and Mr Sheehan about the changes that we have made regarding orthopaedics moving to a regional service, the elective surgeries at Lagan Valley and our cancer reset services. All those steps are critical in ensuring that we can maintain a service. It is not the service that I would like or want, but it is so that we can maintain a service while we have to support and help all those coming forward with COVID-19. There is no point in our health service where we can ask somebody to make a judgement and say to someone who is walking up to the door of a hospital, "You have COVID-19. I don't have a bed for you today". I do not expect our health service to do that, so the additional pressures come at that point of challenge.

The Member is right about the statutory challenge role of the Committee and of the House. I have raised that point before in the Committee and in the House, and it was addressed when the junior Ministers came from the Executive Office to address some of the regulations. Many of the regulations are cross-sectional, they cross all Departments, and they have implications across other bodies apart from mine. As these are health regulations, I am here to table them, but they are brought by and for the Executive. The point that the Member made is valid because there is a dangerous narrative that more people are getting the virus but not as many people are dying. Not as many people are dying at this time, but we have always seen a lag from infection to hospitalisation to ICU to deaths, and that is why we are taking steps now to reduce the number of deaths. There are improvements in treatment and in knowledge, but the best thing that we can do is stop people getting the virus. Pat rightly challenges that narrative. Not as many people are dying now, but I ask people who put forward that narrative: what is your trigger point? How many people dying a day from COVID-19 is the point at which you want us to take action? Should we sit back until you say that a certain number of people have died so I, as Health Minister, have to do something? That is not how I work, that is not how our health service works, and I sincerely hope that nobody in this House thinks that we should measure our reaction in that way with the severity and the proportionality of the regulations that we bring in.

We have had conversations round the Executive table about some of the other points that Mr Sheehan raised. There is the challenge of encouraging people who are contacted through our test-and-trace procedure to self-isolate. I know that a conversation is going on between the Department for Communities and the Department of Finance to make sure that we get the support payment measures that are available in England.

The Member for Foyle Gary Middleton said that everyone has a role to play and that we must all take personal responsibility. I do not think that we can simply legislate or fine our way out of this. If I did, I think that we would see a lot more draconian measures. There is a role for

enforcement and encouragement, but there is an onus and emphasis on personal responsibility. I think that the majority of people in Northern Ireland are taking that upon themselves, but a small minority is doing damage. I echo his comments about the role of local councils. Derry City and Strabane District Council in the past few weeks has been an example to other councils. The messaging and coordination and having voices at a local level have got people engaged. We have not seen the outworkings of that through a decrease in numbers up there yet, but the message is now there. That was replicated across other council areas as they saw the incidence in their areas start to increase.

Daniel McCrossan spoke about his personal experience, and I think that Mr Allister picked up on that. That is so valuable. A number of Ministers are now self-isolating because they have been in contact with somebody who has tested positive. That goes to show that this virus excuses nobody and misses nobody and that nobody is above it or immune from it.

The Member talked about the information that is available. Much more information than people realise is available on our dashboard about the number of hospitalisations and the number of people who have been discharged. The information is broken down in great detail and gives the number of hospital admissions, the numbers in ICU and a breakdown of positive cases by age group and council area. There is a lot of information there.

4.15 pm

The Member also raised another challenge that is often repeated: people saying that this is a lesser strain. No, it is not. There is nothing to prove that it is a lesser strain. It goes back to the earlier point: we now have better ways to treat the virus. In most cases, we know how to treat it. We now have medications that we did not have at the start of the pandemic, and we know which ones work. The dangerous narrative that people do not have to worry about this and that it is no worse than a minor flu falls.

The Member raised the issues of enforcement and compliance, which have been raised across the piece. That is why I asked for a group to be set up within the Executive to work across Departments and with outside agencies to increase the emphasis on enforcement and compliance so that we can give a clear signal to those who abide by the guidance and the regulations that anybody who thinks that they are above it and bigger than it will be held to account. I welcome that.

Sinéad Bradley was called to speak without knowing that she was going to be. I thank her for her comments. She had a heartfelt approach to the message that needs to come from this place: this is about what we can do for others. It is a balancing act; there is no win-win. It is about making the best decisions with what we have to prevent the collapse of our health service and prevent more people getting COVID and to ensure that our education and our economy can go ahead. The Member was right to say that there is no absolute. So many people expect, want or ask for an absolute. They call on the Executive to produce that absolute, but there is none. Things are done from personal perspectives, understanding and approaches, which we as an Executive, as an Assembly and as a society have to take on. One of the most important words that the Member used was "empower". It is about the actions of individuals

and communities to support those who need help, whether as a result of COVID, self-isolation or mental health challenges, and that is the challenge that we also have to address. The Member's final comment was that more may need to be done. We are in this together. That is the message from society and Northern Ireland as a whole.

Mr Allister talked about the detail of the regulations, as I expected him to. The paragraph to which he referred states that, after consulting the CMO and the CSA, I can make a direction. If the Member thinks that my Executive colleagues are so timid and so afraid of me that they simply go with what I say without challenge or contest or without putting forward a different option, I wish that his impression was right, because it would make this work an awful lot easier. He is right that the detail of the law, as drafted, gives me phenomenal power, but he knows me well enough to know that I take the use of that power very seriously and would not use it without guidance from and consultation with the CMO, the CSA and my Executive colleagues.

Mr Allister referred to anonymous sources in the media. I say to him — he is a long-standing Member of the House and of the legal profession — would he base a legal argument on anonymous sources whom he heard quoted on Radio Ulster? I do not think that he would, as a professional or a politician, so I will not engage in that debate. It was designed solely to set a direction of conversation before that conversation had, in fact, happened. The Member is right, and this is something that I have always said: the impact of what we do must be balanced by the Executive as a whole. That is about me putting forward my case as Health Minister to ensure that our health service is not overwhelmed and does not run into the same challenges as it did in the first wave. Today, we have 22 people in ICUs and 140 in inpatient beds. Those 140 people need to be nursed, supported by auxiliary workers and domestic staff, fed and looked after. They need to be in those beds while they combat COVID, but those are 140 beds that our health service cannot use for other patients.

Mr Allister raised the issue of community immunity. That will come about through the implementation of vaccination and the uptake of the vaccine. We still do not know how long a vaccine will be potent for. It is not about getting out there and seeing how we survive. We do not do that with the flu, polio or other medical challenges that modern society has faced and combated through vaccination. Simply letting the virus rip and seeing where it ends up, which is what many interpret herd immunity to be, although Mr Allister moved away from that phrase, is not something that I will support as Health Minister, and I do not think that it is what the Member means.

Mr Allister: I am grateful to the Minister. His message is that, until there is a vaccine, the only response that we have to an upsurge in cases is to clamp down with various shades of lockdown. That is the only strategy that there is. Is it not the case that the balance of the scientific evidence suggests that people who have had COVID acquire some element of immunity? Is that right or wrong?

Mr Swann: The Member's point is that there is some level of immunity, which we do not know yet. This is still a new virus. Northern Ireland had its first case in February. Members keep talking about what we knew eight months ago. Eight months ago, this scared — I will not use the

language that is in the back of my head, but I know how I felt as Health Minister at that point.

The point that I made earlier and that the Member has made is that the issue is how we live with the virus. We will live with the virus using various shades of — I will not use the word “lockdown” — implementation of regulation and restriction. That should be proportionate to the increase in cases, hospitalisations and ICU admissions. It would be different if this were simply about positive cases that were stand-alone and did not lead to an increase in hospital admissions. We have seen admissions increase over the past seven days, and we will see them increase further over the next seven days. Those hospitalisations lead to further ICU admissions and further deaths. Positive cases translate to hospitalisations, ICU admissions and potential deaths. We have to learn to live with the virus, and we do that by bringing in the regulations and restrictions that we have brought in to date. There is only one set of steps that we know to work, and that is the set that we used at the beginning of this year, but we have to make sure that the steps are proportionate and balanced.

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Yes, Mr Chambers.

Mr Chambers: Does the Minister agree that, if we were to go down the road of herd immunity, we would, effectively, sacrifice the weakest and most vulnerable to the virus?

Mr Swann: That is the interpretation of many of what herd immunity means. It is not what Sweden practised, even though many claim that it is.

We all have a responsibility to help to curb the spread of the virus. We do that by maintaining social distancing; by maintaining good hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene; by wearing face coverings; and by self-isolating immediately if we experience any symptoms, including a new, persistent cough, a fever or a loss of or change in smell or taste. We do that by seeking a test if we experience any of those symptoms, by downloading the StopCOVID NI app and by complying with the restrictions and regulations that are in place. By following that advice as we go about our daily life, we can protect ourselves and others from serious illness, protect our health service, our economy and our education service and help to avoid further prolonged and more stringent restrictions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

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

Private Members' Business

Increasing the Number of Police Officers in Northern Ireland

Mr Clarke: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of effective, responsive and visible policing across Northern Ireland; highlights that better-resourced neighbourhood and local policing teams stand to improve outcomes in addressing traditional and emerging crime threats, preventing harm and promoting grassroots support for law and order; stresses, moreover, the critical need to ensure the Police Service of Northern Ireland is appropriately resourced to deal with the enduring threat of terrorism and paramilitary activity; welcomes, to this end, the Executive commitment contained in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) to increase police officer numbers to 7,500; expresses deep concern with the lack of progress and inaction to date; and calls on the Minister of Justice to work proactively with the Minister of Finance to honour and implement the commitment to enhanced local police numbers by the end of this Assembly mandate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business

Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr Clarke: I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

Today, my colleagues and I call on the Justice Minister to implement the commitment that all five parties signed up to under ‘New Decade, New Approach’ to take the strength of our police force in Northern Ireland to 7,500. In ‘NDNA’, reference was made to the figure 7,500 and to how:

“The Executive will deliver committal reform to help speed up the criminal justice system, benefiting victims and witnesses.”

At a time when other obligations, which may be worthy, are being met in what seems to be an accelerated fashion — one example of that is the medical school at Magee — we have to be sure that all provisions are handled fairly and evenly, including this one on the police.

4.30 pm

On 21 May, the Justice Minister stated in response to a question from my party colleague Mervyn Storey that that commitment was not a priority. I must say that it gives me great concern that that would be suggested in that letter at that time. It, therefore, seems as though the Minister has failed to accept the importance of that measure to address an ageing and overburdened police force, to meet the dangerous gaps in investigative expertise and to relieve the pressure on specialist departments, including the teams that deal with rape crime, child abuse and cybercrime, to name but a few. It may not be her priority today, but, sadly, the reality is that it will be society's problem tomorrow if that is not addressed.

In recent years, the general trend has been for fewer police officers and reduced police budgets. The annual budget cycle has precluded strategic thinking. The Chief Constable has struggled to maintain current officer and staff numbers let alone increase them. Indeed, if we look as far back as the Patten proposals, we see that they made it clear that the figure of 7,500 should form the basis of the budget that is given to the Chief Constable. It is important to note that the delivery of enhanced numbers should, therefore, go in tandem with ensuring that budget arrangements are strategic, sustainable and meet the recurring costs of additional manpower.

None of us would suggest that we did not want better resourced neighbourhood and local policing teams. The local policing review indicated a desire in local communities for more visible and effective neighbourhood policing. Indeed, we do not have to look at reports to see that. Many of us have been on PCSPs and to public meetings where the police is a topic and have heard many members of the public express concerns about the lack of visibility of policing. I put on record my thanks to Simon Byrne, because he recognises the importance of neighbourhood policing, and, when he came to Northern Ireland, one of the first things that he suggested was to put neighbourhood officers back on the streets, unlike his predecessor.

The PSNI has invested in 400 new neighbourhood officers, with at least one in each electoral ward. I am sure that you will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that that is insufficient and cannot deliver on public expectations. Indeed, it will never deliver any good outcomes. Local communities want to see more officers in front-line roles to give everyone more confidence in their everyday life. It would also help to promote grassroots support for the police in each and every community. We know that the PSNI has many communities to police, some more difficult than others. In some communities, it is nigh on impossible. We know that, in areas where they have to travel in heavily armoured vehicles, it makes their role much more difficult, as opposed to other areas where they can take a much lighter approach. Indeed, in some areas, they can enjoy the use of a bicycle. The sooner we see that, the better. We are a long way off that. I commend the officers who do their job in those difficult circumstances.

Support in other communities needs to be built upon. The numbers would help to address that. Resource is also needed to help to address paramilitarism and the threat of that activity. As we know, Northern Ireland sits at the highest level of threat, as it has for a number of years. One of Patten's recommendations was that:

"Provided the peace process does not collapse and the security situation does not deteriorate significantly from the situation pertaining at present, the approximate size of the police service over the next ten years should be 7,500 full time officers."

It is sad that we have never got to that stage. Indeed, one other emerging problem, which Simon Byrne has noted, as have many in the Chamber, is the fearmongering about Brexit and concerns about how that will be policed. Yet, we have not been concerned to address those numbers. I hope that the Minister will address that issue today.

In these unprecedented times of change in everyone's life during the past months, the police have not been immune.

A number of months before COVID-19, Simon Byrne had reintroduced neighbourhood officers. Then, COVID-19 came along. The first place where he could strip back the service in order to help to make the police more resilient was to remove those officers and change their roles. Again, that shows that there is no meat in the service that could make the police more resilient to those demands.

In these exceptional times, there is an expectation that the police will be at every corner. In the Chamber, we all know that that will not necessarily be the case. I commend them for the work that they did during the first wave of the pandemic. They had a very difficult task. Expectations were high. Expectations of enforcement were extremely high. The police did a good job on that.

This is not said to minimise the effects of COVID-19, but, as we move into the second wave, the expectation that the police will be on every corner to make sure that people are wearing face masks is unsustainable, to say the least. It is made even more unsustainable by the fact that there are so few officers on the ground.

In my constituency, the Antrim town police station was closed for almost a week because officers had contracted COVID-19. At the weekend, we heard that the Strand Road police station had to be closed for a number of hours as more officers were infected with COVID-19. I put on record that I wish the officers well, a speedy recovery and a return to duty as soon as is humanly possible. Those events all highlight the difficulty of having a force that has insufficient numbers. Indeed, the Chief Constable said at a Policing Board briefing that, based on stats, predictions and some of the evidence, at one stage during the first wave, it was predicted that the police could lose up to a third of its workforce. That puts into sharp focus the difficulties that we will have with the limited numbers that the police have today.

The Sinn Féin amendment suggests that a funding package is needed from the British Government to deliver the 7,500 officers. I wonder whether Sinn Féin will come forward with the same suggestion when bringing forward the Irish language Bill and the other language Bills? Will those Bills be predicated on money or go ahead regardless of what money comes forward? We will therefore not be supporting the amendment. The workforce deserves to be increased to 7,500, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

From 2009 to 2019, police force numbers dropped from 7,300 to 6,700. Even with numerous recruitment processes, numbers, as of today, stand at a little over 6,900. In Northern Ireland, the police force loses approximately 5% of officers through retirement and resignation annually. In Northern Ireland, the PSNI has a particularly ageing workforce, with 20% of officers eligible for retirement within the next three years. The most recent resilience review by Her Majesty's Inspectorate in 2017 cited a review that took place in 2013, which stated that if efficiencies were made elsewhere, the savings could be redirected to meeting police demand, but that has not happened.

The demands on the PSNI are more wide-ranging than those faced by most forces in England and Wales. The PSNI faces an ongoing threat from dissident terrorist activity in Northern Ireland. To put that into perspective, dealing with the dissident threat alone accounts for 20% of

MI5's budget. Spiralling overtime costs are now soaring. If those costs could be reduced, there would be clear benefits. A way in which to reduce overtime would be to increase the size of the service. We are mindful that, without a corresponding increase in training provision and recruitment processes, the commitment to 7,500 will take longer to materialise. Indeed, it will take even longer if we do not start the process.

The figure is not only part of the Patten proposals but part of the 2005 recommendation on the part-time reserve. That seems to have been airbrushed by some, but it is vital that it be pursued as quickly as possible. It is also vital that the Justice Minister work with the Department of Finance and the joint board set up under NDNA to oversee the public transformation of policing, and they must work with both Governments to seek funding support to allow policing capacity to become fully operational. I commend the motion.

Ms Dillon: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "concern" and insert:

"that the costs of delivering the full range of priorities set out in New Decade, New Approach are far in excess of the funding package provided by the British Government; and calls on the British Government to provide adequate funding to take forward the New Decade, New Approach priorities, which will enable the Executive to honour and implement the commitment to enhanced local police numbers by the end of this Assembly mandate."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Members who brought the motion to the House today. I currently sit on the Justice Committee but was formerly on the Policing Board, so I do have some knowledge of the issues. I absolutely accept what you are saying about the number of police that we need, and we need to get to that 7,500 figure. All Members, or at least most Members, in the Chamber will agree with the main thrust of the motion, which concerns the importance of having an "effective, responsive and visible" policing service across the North.

I am glad to see the emphasis placed on neighbourhood and local policing teams, but I would expect no different. From my time on the Policing Board, I know that we placed an emphasis on them. As Mr Clarke has outlined, and as I am sure we all accept, that will improve outcomes in many if not all types of crimes, including the scourge of drug dealing in our communities, domestic violence, ongoing paramilitary violence, child sexual exploitation, human trafficking, antisocial behaviour and rural crime, to name but a few.

Members will know that Sinn Féin's argument and support for policing with the community is a core and fundamental part of a modern police service. That concept was also at the centre of the Patten report, as was the view that 7,500 officers was the appropriate and necessary size of such a new service here. As the motion states, that commitment from the Executive is contained in NDNA. Such commitments need resources. It is only here that Sinn Féin's amendment adds more realism and improves the motion. Where does the financial resource come from?

The increase in the number of police officers will cost tens of millions of pounds. I am not the first Member to say that the Executive do not have the resources to cover all of the commitments in NDNA. In fact, the range of priorities are far in excess of the funding package provided by the British Government.

It is, perhaps, timely to remind Members that the British Government are refusing to pay for a victims and survivors' pension, which could run into hundreds of millions of pounds. That is the same Government that have legislated for that pension, and the scheme is to be hierarchical and discriminatory. It is also the same Government that has refused to set up such legacy mechanisms as the Historical Investigations Unit, which was agreed by both Governments and our five main parties in the Stormont House Agreement.

Successive Chief Constables agree that this would take massive pressure off the PSNI, not just in respect of resource but also in increasing confidence in present and future policing. That last example shows that the issue is not solely about financial resource, but financial resource is essential. As far back as the Stormont House Agreement in 2014, £150 million was promised by the British Government to the legacy mechanisms. Julian Smith, the previous British Secretary of State, added £100 million. Has anyone seen a single cent? Absolutely not. Instead of asking the Justice Minister and the Finance Minister to turn water into wine, the amendment simply asks that Members support our Ministers in going to not only where the money is available, but where the duty is to supply it: the British Government.

Mrs D Kelly: I support the amendment. It is unfortunate that we are not singing from the one hymn sheet, because it would be a good signal from the Chamber if we could unite around additional financial support for policing. I know, from a Policing Board perspective — I declare that I am a member of the Policing Board — that there is a business case, if not already with the Justice Minister then en route to her, for additional financial support for the recruitment of officers to bring the numbers up to 7,500. Of course, as Mr Clarke said, that was a Patten recommendation and set in a context in which there would no longer be paramilitary violence, as we had hoped that we would have moved on, almost 19 years later, to a more normal society, however one would define "normal" in Northern Ireland. It might require some better minds than mine. However, we should, at least, have moved on substantially.

The British Prime Minister has recognised that there is a need to invest in additional support for policing across England and Wales, and it had been hoped that there would be additional recognition for policing here in Northern Ireland.

Like others, the SDLP is supportive of the neighbourhood policing teams. We already see those teams making a difference across our districts. The Chief Constable and the senior team are to be commended for the reintroduction of those teams.

There is a huge need for greater representation and a challenge in relation to the recruitment programme. Mr Clarke is right to point out that there are difficulties in capacity within the police college. The police have tried to adopt online recruitment and to commission some of

the test online, rather than candidates having to attend a particular venue. More needs to be done in that regard and more needs to be done right across the piece to attract a greater number of recruits from west of the Bann, from Protestant working-class communities and, particularly, from Catholics.

4.45 pm

It is unfortunate that the British Government decided to do away with the 50:50 recruitment, because that would have seen a Police Service that was representative of the community that it seeks to serve. In only the last few months, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary published a report in relation to police representativeness. It states:

"Creating a more representative police service for Northern Ireland is a complex issue. It will only happen as part of a process involving the whole of society. But the PSNI has made considerable efforts to address the problem."

We all know that much more needs to be done. The legitimacy of the Police Service relies upon it being much more diverse. By enabling a greater number of recruits, we enable that diversity to be better represented by how we seek to bring forward recruits and by offering a greater number of opportunities for them.

Members are quite right to thank the police who, as front-line workers during the pandemic, put themselves at risk and were at the forefront of imposing some of the restrictions on our lives in a way which was sympathetic to the needs of the health service. They adopted the approach of, "engage, explain and enforce if you need to", as the best way of gaining community cooperation.

The Justice Minister well knows that there is a real necessity to increase the number of officers, especially from under-represented sections of the community, including BAME, and for improving the gender profile, both in the senior team and at recruit level. There are issues as to how we move forward with policing. We want to see people who reflect the society and background that we come from. We want to see, through the rank and file, equality of opportunity right across the Police Service. Work needs to be done at recruitment level, but measures have to be put in place that are going to stop the —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Mrs D Kelly: — downward trend, whereby, in four years' time, we could be at serious risk of running to 19% of Catholic officers in the Police Service.

Mr Nesbitt: I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am happy to say that the Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion but not the amendment.

I note that reference is made to the commitment in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. The figure of 7,500 officers is cited only once, on page 7. I quote:

"The Executive will increase police numbers to 7,500."

It does not say: "The Executive will seek funding from the British Government to increase numbers." Therefore, it is a commitment, as Members, have said, and it predates

NDNA and goes all the way back to 1998. The Ulster Unionist Party has been consistent in its support for the figure of 7,500. My colleagues Doug Beattie and, before him, Ross Hussey, who preceded me on the Policing Board, and probably members before that, were supportive of that figure.

It is interesting to note, almost in passing, that Chris Patten did not recommend 7,500 as a solid figure. On page 77 of his report, he makes clear that the number is "approximate". I quote:

"This cannot be a precise science, and it is an important proposition of this report that the Chief Constable should have some discretion as to the precise numbers and ranks of officers and civilians who should be employed within the budget at his/her disposal; so the figure of 7,500 is a notional one, which we believe should form the basis of the budget given to the Chief Constable."

This debate and direction of travel is not simply about the numbers, but about what those officers do. Let us recall that, when we reformed policing in 1998, we were hoping to take the opportunity of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement to allow the police to evolve from what they had been forced to become, which was a police force dedicated to an antiterrorism strategy.

With the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement came the opportunity to transform from a force into a service — a service keeping our communities safe. At the core of that was a transformation into community policing.

I have again been reviewing the Patten report. He said:

"Policing with the community should be the core function of the police service and the core function of every police station."

He also stated:

"Every neighbourhood (or rural area) should have a dedicated policing team with lead responsibility for policing its area."

Interestingly, he said:

"members of the policing team should serve at least three and preferably five years in the same neighbourhood".

In other words, they should get well embedded in the community to deliver the new concept of neighbourhood and community policing.

I know that the Chief Constable — Mr Clarke made point this point — is very keen on that direction of travel. In supporting the increase to 7,500, we must also support the Chief Constable, who, of course, is in charge of the PSNI's operation, in putting a focus on neighbourhood and community policing, because that can transform how the community views the police.

I go back to Patten just one more time. On page 13 of his report, when talking about the perceptions of the police force at the time, he said:

"Interestingly, when asked about the performance of their local police, as opposed to police performance in Northern Ireland as a whole, the satisfaction rate among Catholics has tended to be higher, while the

Protestant rate has consistently been lower than their respective approval ratings of police performance in Northern Ireland as a whole."

There is the key to transforming the interaction between the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the people and the communities that it serves.

Again, the Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion, but we emphasise that, while there is a need to increase officer numbers to 7,500, it is also about what those officers do and about making sure that we do what we can to get rid of the paramilitary and terrorist threat and the organised crime that soak up the resources that we would rather see working in the community.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he acknowledge that the police service ought to reflect the community that it seeks to serve and that, therefore, we need to see representatives from all sections of the community in the police on a proportional basis that reflects the geographic and demographic make-up of Northern Ireland?

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

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her intervention. Yes, I think that a police service that is as reflective of the community as possible is the best way to go forward. We also think of our increasing ethnic minorities and how we want to see them represented in the police force. I have been asking questions to that effect at the Policing Board, and it appears that we are making some ground on ethnic representation, although, at a senior level, I think that superintendent is the highest rank of any member of our ethnic community. Having 7,500 officers who are as reflective of the community as possible and who are embedded as deeply as possible in our community is the way to go.

Mr Blair: On behalf of Alliance, I support the amendment in the first instance. At the outset, I should declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board.

The amendment, I believe, correctly addresses the realities of the long-awaited increase in PSNI officer numbers, as well as the significant shortfall in UK Government funding made available to fulfil New Decade, New Approach commitments. The motion, whilst addressing the importance of visible neighbourhood policing and other matters, references inaction when, in fact, there might have been some progress already, as mentioned by Dolores Kelly a moment ago. I also feel that it falls a little short in addressing the need for collaborative action, forward planning and, indeed, collective responsibility for New Decade, New Approach. The amendment also references UK Government funding directly and calls on the Executive to take action to follow up on that existing commitment. I should say, however, that we understand the core intent of the original motion, and I, like all Members, support the call for increased policing resource.

As a Policing Board member and an MLA, I am acutely aware of the challenges facing policing, not least in the current COVID-19 scenario.

Members will be only too familiar with the expectation that is placed on the PSNI in policing the pandemic, as

has been only too well publicised in recent days. That expectation should be measured in the context that the police are often responding, with their own internal COVID human resource challenges, in a situation in which 101 and 999 calls and antisocial behaviour reports are now back at pre-lockdown levels. That, of course, comes in addition to the very worrying pressure that is created by increased domestic violence reports since the beginning of lockdown in March. All that is being policed against the backdrop of continued severe dissident terrorist threats and uncertainties for policing in light of eventual EU exit outcomes.

I have no doubt that, like her Executive colleagues and Members throughout the House, the Minister of Justice sees the policing resource issue as a priority, and I am sure that she will respond accordingly today. I am also sure that the Chief Constable knows the importance of efficiency, process review and modernisation of service delivery as part of the equation. I hope that the message from the House today is one of support for those who are trying to deliver in the interests of keeping people safe.

Perhaps, on that theme of people and community safety, we can also use today as an opportunity to review and refresh approaches to joined-up policing. We all know the line, "Policing cannot be done by the police alone", and some of us have used it in the past. We know that it is more true today than ever, with changing societal need and a rising mental health response requirement. We know that police officers are often delayed for hours on end in A&E units and that much police work is done with young people in places where there is no structured youth provision. We know that, despite successful nurse-led custody work, triage response teams and other multi-agency trials, there is not yet an agreed, collaborative, interdepartmental and inter-agency framework for delivery. The police continue to lead on issues and in areas that are not essentially policing issues.

Those arrangements, like the need to address the current year-on-year funding set-up, are vital if we are to plan properly and use any increase in police numbers to the best effect. They can also assist in delivering associated Executive plans on mental health and tackling paramilitarism. In the expectation that agreement in the debate will be focused on effective delivery as well as increased resource, I am happy to support the amendment as a step towards a better-resourced, politically supported, inclusive and representative Police Service.

Mr T Buchanan: I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. It is fair to say that there is consensus across the board that the PSNI is not the fully representative organisation that it ought to be, despite the huge demand on its services, which is more far-reaching and demanding than that of any other police service throughout the UK. The police have faced budget cuts year after year, which have consequently forced them to curtail the number of officers and police staff. With fewer numbers, it is inevitable that the same quality of service simply cannot be provided to the community. It should not come as any surprise to us that, as the level of overtime has gone up and the level of sickness and absence from work has increased, morale levels in the PSNI have gone down.

Investigations and reports into the running of the PSNI have found a consistent theme, with difficulties for long-

term planning because of the short-term nature of the funding that is provided for the service. Patten has been mentioned today but it bears repetition. The Patten report recommended that the number of police officers should not be reduced below 7,500:

“until Northern Ireland can be judged with confidence to have become a permanently peaceful society.”

Nobody in the Chamber today can put their hand on their heart and say that we are living in a Northern Ireland that is a “permanently peaceful society”. We have recently seen reports about the New IRA recruiting significant numbers of young people. Its operations are still being uncovered by MI5, and we welcome that. MI5 itself has said that the threat presented by dissident republicans still exists and is still dangerous in Northern Ireland. The Police Service faces many issues, with COVID and all the other pressures, and it has to deal with the dissident republican threat, yet its numbers are not where they ought to be.

5.00 pm

It is important to point out that Patten recommended not only that the numbers should not go below 7,500 but that the number of part-time Reserve officers should be increased to 2,500. I wonder where that has got to and what work the Minister has been doing on that. Perhaps she will tell us in her response.

For the Police Service to be sustainable and effective, funding needs to be made available to recruit additional officers, and the required mentoring must be made available, as stated in ‘New Decade, New Approach’. Patten made it clear that the figure of 7,500 officers:

“should form the basis of the budget given to the Chief Constable.”

Therefore, it is important that the delivery of enhanced numbers should go in tandem with making sure that budget arrangements are strategic and sustainable and meet the recurring cost of the additional manpower.

Let us not be distracted by the amendment, which calls for more funding from the British Government and takes away from the core issue. Policing and justice is a devolved matter. Therefore, we cannot lose sight of the pivotal role that the Justice Minister, working proactively with the Finance Minister, has in progressing the matter. I hope that, in responding to the debate, she will be so kind as to inform the House what progress she has made since taking up office to champion the cause of adequate police numbers as brought forward in the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ document.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way. Much has been said about money. My constituency colleague Mr Blair talked about how the Chief Constable controls his budget. However, if he had more officers and could reduce overtime costs, he would have more control of his budget and would be able to make better use of the money.

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

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you. That is a good point, and it is one that the Minister needs to take on board.

If I remember correctly, the Minister, in an interview shortly after taking up her post, indicated that she could not

commit to an increase in police numbers. As my colleague Mr Clarke said in his opening remarks, the Minister, in response to Mervyn Storey, stated that this was not a priority for her. I wonder what message of confidence that sent to the rank and file of serving police officers. Those officers continually stand on the front line, and, because of the lack of numbers, they are continually asked to provide extra services and to do overtime in order to fill the gap.

Does the Justice Minister doubt the Chief Constable’s evidence of need and demand? Let us hope that, after this debate, we will see a change of attitude and that the Minister will be more determined to work proactively with the Minister of Finance and others to honour, by the end of the Assembly mandate, the commitment to implement enhanced police numbers in ‘New Decade, New Approach’.

Mr Lynch: I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board.

As other Members have outlined, we support going back to the 7,500 officers envisaged by Patten. I welcome the renewed focus on strengthening the approaches to and support mechanisms for policing in the community. That needs to be complemented by an increase in resources — human and financial — for neighbourhood policing teams. If we are to have a police service that commands community confidence, it needs to reflect the community that it serves. That requires affirmative action to bring traditionally unrepresented groups into policing to ensure equality of opportunity in promotion. That means an ongoing commitment to having more women, nationalists, ethnic minorities, LGBT and people from working-class backgrounds in policing. It is not good enough to have those groups join the ranks of the PSNI; they must be in visible positions at both rank-and-file and leadership levels. Representativeness remains a problem. In the recent recruitment for senior officers, representativeness was disappointing. I acknowledge that the PSNI is aware of that and is looking at ways to improve it.

Everyone is entitled to policing that serves the people by enhancing community safety. Forging a good relationship between the police and the community is vital for effective civic policing. That relationship must, in the first instance, be based on mutual respect, and that can happen only if police activity is informed by a focus on human rights and equality. Furthermore, it must be based on partnership with the community and community consent. Those are the elements of the approach that we call “Policing with the community”.

From my experience — Mr Nesbitt also mentioned this — in the original PCSPs, community policing often fell down when officers who had built a good relationship with a local community were moved to other duties, leaving much good work lost. The new neighbourhood officers should not be extracted from their main duties. Back in September, at the partnership committee of the Policing Board, I asked the Chief Constable for an update on the neighbourhood extraction plan and any other measures to ensure that officers have the time and space for meaningful engagement and partnership work with communities. I welcomed the Chief Constable’s intention to minimise any extraction of neighbourhood officers from their community duties. The PSNI must ensure that policing with the community is embedded in training for new officers that includes mediation training and effective problem-solving.

For Sinn Féin, policing with the community is the overarching principle that should be at the core of civic policing. That overarching policing with the community approach incorporates the deployment of neighbourhood teams in addition to ensuring that all officers, without exception, incorporate that approach to their own duties and areas of responsibility. Police officers who are visible, take a proactive partnership-based approach that is community-orientated and focus on outreach and problem-solving as well as enforcement will help to secure public confidence in policing. That should, in turn, improve outcomes in addressing crime and enhancing community safety.

Mr Givan: I thank our party colleagues on the Policing Board for the excellent work that they do and for bringing the motion to the House.

This is an issue that members of the Justice Committee have touched on. We had the Chief Constable before us very recently — on 24 September. When we were speaking about the range of challenges that the police face, we asked him about the number of officers at his disposal. We asked about the New Decade New Approach commitments — the 7,500 officers — and the discussions that the PSNI had had with the Department. The Chief Constable was able to indicate that the issue has formed part of the comprehensive spending review business case for the next three years. A submission has been made to that effect, and a bid has been put forward to get us to that 7,500 complement. I appeal to the Department of Justice to give it the priority that it deserves, and I am sure that the Minister will touch on that in her response. Any organisation can put in bids, but we really need the Minister's support in getting behind this and making it clear that it is a priority. I know that colleagues have alluded to the correspondence with the Member for North Antrim Mr Storey in which the Minister indicated that it was not a priority because of other inescapable pressures that face the Department. I am sure that the Minister will also touch on that in her response, but we really need to see this made a priority.

Members commented on Patten and the commitments that it made. A huge number of changes were made as a result of the Patten reforms, but this one has fallen by the wayside. We need to see that commitment honoured.

The part-time Reserve is another issue that colleagues have mentioned. A real look needs to be taken at that. The Member for South Antrim Mr Clarke touched on the police's increasing overtime expenditure every year. One needs to ask this: if you had a part-time Reserve, would there be the same need for overtime? If we had a properly resourced part-time Reserve, could those Reserve officers be given the workload of policing the new COVID regulations that have been put in place rather than that being taken on by full-time officers who are already stretched in dealing with normal crime? There needs to be a focus on the part-time Reserve.

The debate has, of course, touched on the need for community representation and for policing to reflect the community. For a long time, we had the stain on this Province of discrimination against people because of their Protestant faith. Indeed, many Protestants who joined the police had never been in a church and were not remotely interested in religion but had been defined as "Protestant" on the basis of the school that they went to or because

that was the faith of their parents or grandparents. It did not just discriminate against those who were practising Protestants; those who were agnostic to it all were identified in that way. That is an appalling place that we got to, and we should avoid that.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I give way to Mr Clarke.

Mr Clarke: The Member makes a good point about that and about religion. Is the Member aware that, in terms of the recruitment processes, people in one community in particular — the community that some Members on the other side want to be better represented — do not actually apply to join the police?

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

Mr Givan: That takes me on to the next point. If you are to tackle why a certain section of the community does not apply, you need to look at the causation factors. If the GAA was more supportive of the police force, more welcoming of officers and actually encouraged that and if the community that they come from was supportive of that, more people would apply. You do not then punish the Protestant community.

Mr Lynch has added in that we need to have more nationalists in the Police Service.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will not. Usually I would, Linda, but I have got only 90 seconds.

We are not saying that we need more unionists in the police force. I do not want to see more nationalists in the police force. I want to see the best-possible police officers irrespective of community background, and we should not get dragged back into that debate. The motion would allow us all to get behind the need for 7,500 officers who can do the job and properly represent us and allow us to get behind a recruitment campaign that would flow from that. Sinn Féin, for only the first time, went to the launch of that recruitment exercise this year. Despite having bought into the policing structures, it was only this year that Sinn Féin went to that. We need people to actively encourage people from their community to apply, not penalise the other community. We need to get away from "Them-uns" and "The others" and ask for people who are capable of doing the job.

We need to strengthen our police force. The specialist units that deal with rape crime, child abuse and cybercrime are all understaffed, and there are pressures on the different units in the PSNI. Let us get behind the need to honour Patten and New Decade, New Approach. I encourage the Minister to make this her top priority and take it forward through a Department of Justice bid to the Department of Finance. Let us support our police officers, who are out there trying to support the whole community.

Ms S Bradley: As the SDLP spokesperson on justice, I support the motion as amended, and I speak to the obvious pressures on resource in the PSNI that were sufficient to, rightly, justify putting this into the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. Since then, the Justice Committee has heard directly from the Chief Constable about how COVID has impacted further on stretched resources. Initially, the types of crimes shifted

during lockdown, with an increased emphasis on domestic violence emerging. Since then, the restrictions have eased and crime has resumed, but all of that happened in addition to the pressures that COVID brought along. Furthermore, the Brexit disaster rumbles on, with negative soundings that we may not strike a deal with the EU. If that is the case, let us not pretend that the Chief Constable has not already put it on record that the pressures on policing will become immense. We could face disruption, through to slower and more laborious working practices, and the absence of data sharing will lead to immense problems in the Police Service. While I support the motion, I do not think that it is fair not to give that consideration.

The 'New Decade, New Approach' document has many items in it, across all Departments. Do we intend to bring each Minister in front of the House to put each priority item to him or her? Perhaps we would do that in normal times, but these are not normal times. The House has to get behind the document as best it can under the circumstances. I do not think that it is valid to say that the amendment that has been proposed is a distraction. It is not. The amendment is steeped in reality.

5.15 pm

Any party that signed up to New Decade, New Approach had only to go through the list of priorities in it to see that extra money would be required to achieve them. If people did not think that extra money would be required, they really have to ask themselves some very serious questions. The understanding was that additional money would be required to achieve anything in that document, and we all have to unite behind holding the Government to account to bring forward that money.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for giving way. It is baffling that people do not think that we should ask the British Government to give the money that they said that they would give under NDNA. They said that they would give resource to go with what was agreed in NDNA, and it baffles me that people think that we should instead be dipping into resources that we need for our children's education, our health system and everything else. Almost everybody in the House has a Minister. Those Ministers are crying out for resources and money, yet Members are saying that we should not ask the British Government for more money. I am absolutely baffled by that attitude.

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

Ms S Bradley: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for her intervention, and I agree entirely. We could go through the document. There are pledges in it for 900 nursing and midwifery undergraduate places, palliative care service improvements and IVF cycles. There is a list in there, and none of the pledges is prefixed with the words "additional money" that the Member referred to. It was the understanding that there would be additional money.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. On a point of clarification, did her party sign up to NDNA? I have a clear recollection of her party leader saying that he did not support many aspects of the document.

Ms S Bradley: There is, of course, much in the document that parties have issues with.

That brings me on to another point nicely. Members opposite have referred to Patten, and I appreciate that there are Members in the House for whom Patten was very difficult — exceptionally difficult — to take on board. With hindsight, however, was it not the right thing to do? Did it not bring us from a very dark place to relative peace? I give credit to the Members opposite, because there were times that agenda items came up that we half-anticipated Members walking away from. We had to come up with ways of keeping those Members here and ensuring that they did not walk away, but they did not walk away. They stood firm at the time, because there was a consensus that we all had to work together to get to a better place. We are not in a place of absolute peace, but are we not in a better place? Have we not achieved something? Let us at least recognise what we have achieved together and realise that that is important going forward and that we can learn from each other and those who came before us.

I bring my remarks to a close by referring to the absolute need for the police to reflect our society and everybody in it. We all deserve to have confidence in reaching out to the Police Service. My colleague Dolores Kelly rightly referred to 50:50 recruitment. If we are serious about growing our Police Service, and I think that we need to, we must grow it in a way that we know has the absolute confidence of everybody in society.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Members who tabled the motion for bringing this important issue before the House. I have no problem in fully supporting the motion insofar as it goes. I feel that some important issues have been missed in its crafting, and I will come back to that point. The key question is whether the Justice Minister has made a bid for funding to deliver the commitment in New Decade, New Approach or has plans to do so. Perhaps she will share with the House how she sees that important commitment being delivered and the timescale that she envisages for it.

For a number of years in the 1970s and 1980s, I had the privilege of serving my community as a part-time member of the RUC Reserve in my area.

The wide range of people who served with me included teachers, pharmacists, nurses, clergymen, butchers and bakers but, regrettably, I do not recall a candlestick maker in my group. Every evening of the week, up to 40 part-time officers gathered to be detailed on a local area to patrol. Estates and outlying villages witnessed the presence of a team of uniformed officers with local knowledge who were patrolling their area and who were engaging positively with the young people of the area. The reassurance that that offered local communities is hard to quantify, but it was certainly welcome. Regrettably, that visibility on the ground is largely missing now.

At that time, the RUC could call on a complement of around 13,000 officers. In 2001, Chris Patten was charged with the responsibility for making recommendations on the numbers that he reckoned that the PSNI would require to offer a service in a peaceful environment. At the time, the population of Northern Ireland was around 1.69 million; 20 years later, it stands at around 1.91 million. Do the Patten figures need to be readjusted to reflect that increase in the population? I think that my colleague Mr Nesbitt perhaps clarified that by stating that the figure of 7,500 was the starting point.

The motion calls for 7,500 officers, but it makes no mention of the 2,500 part-time officers that were proposed by Patten. This seems to have become some sort of elephant in the room. The reason that is given by police sources is that part-time officers would need to be trained and equipped to the same standard as full-time officers. I do not accept this excuse for ignoring this aspect of Patten's recommendations. The small number of Reserve officers who are employed by the PSNI are long-serving and quite experienced officers, and yet their monthly hours of deployment are rationed. It smacks of a resistance to the employment of part-time officers. I am disappointed that the motion makes no mention of the establishment of a part-time Reserve complement, but I accept that Mr Clarke and Mr Givan referred to it. However, it is missing from the motion and I would have liked to see it in there.

Given that around 300 officers retire or leave the Police Service annually, that number has to be recruited just to stand still. It will take a huge push to not only continue to replace these officers, but to build towards the 7,500 figure. Does the police college have the capacity to deliver these figures? I am confident that many in our communities would be happy to help make their areas safer by serving in a PSNI Reserve service. Eight hundred new full-time officers will very quickly be absorbed across Northern Ireland, but a substantial Reserve service would provide more visibility.

Turning to the Sinn Féin amendment, I doubt, given the challenges, that it is possible to bring the figure up to 7,500 by the end of this mandate. I recognise that this is also an aspiration in the original motion. It would be great if it could happen, and I would fully support such an achievement, but, regrettably, I think that it may be an unrealistic aspiration. I also note the Sinn Féin call for even more funding from the British Government to take forward the New Decade, New Approach priorities. I am sure that they recognise that it is useful to have a generous family member to turn to in times of financial stress and strain.

I conclude by thanking all those who serve in the PSNI for their dedicated service. I place it on record that, when I ask for police assistance and a police officer comes to my home or to my business, I am not really interested in what school they went to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Kellie Armstrong, and she will have the remaining four minutes in this debate to make a contribution.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Deputy Speaker. I probably will not take the full four minutes.

I support the amendment, as confirmed by my colleague John Blair earlier in this debate. If we are to deliver on the priorities that were agreed by the Executive parties in New Decade, New Approach, we absolutely need more resources to do so, and that has been highlighted today. The Minister of Justice has not been inactive on the number of police officers across Northern Ireland, and the PSNI has been not inactive. I take this opportunity to thank the Chief Constable and all the officers who have throughout the pandemic while others have worked from home.

Those on the Policing Board will have had updates on the strategic outline case that was submitted by the PSNI on police officer numbers. We all know that we could meet the New Decade, New Approach target numbers if there

was the money to do so. The Chief Constable has already said that he is looking to grow officer numbers to 7,100 by the end of this financial year. That is hardly him being inactive. In fact, we are currently standing with 6,903 full-time officers and 242 part-time officers. Mr Chambers, if a recruitment process were to go forward, we could at least hit that 7,100 target and, by the end of the mandate, the 7,500.

To reach that target, we all need to support the Minister to ensure that her Department has enough funding to achieve that shared goal. Indeed, the role of Committees is not just to scrutinise but to assist the Minister to fulfil her role. It would be helpful if Members of Executive parties do what they can to help the Chief Constable and the Minister deliver increased policing numbers, as we all agreed to do in the publicly published 'New Decade, New Approach' document. Ministers will fail if we do not have the resources. We do not have the resources, so we have to ask elsewhere. That is why I am supporting the amendment today.

It came as no shock when this came up. We know the resource implications because, after all, we were all in shock when New Decade, New Approach came forward without the required funding for it, earlier this year. I say to everyone, across all Benches, that we do need more police officers. We have a Minister who is working for more police officers. Let us work together and let her achieve that target.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister for Justice, Naomi Long. The Minister will have 15 minutes to respond to the debate.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I am grateful to the Members for bringing this important motion to the House. I fully agree that it is vital to have effective, responsive and visible policing in Northern Ireland. Therefore, Members can be assured that I will continue to give my full support to ensure that the needs of the PSNI are represented, at the Executive table and beyond, to ensure that it has sufficient resources available to deliver.

With regard to how policing resources are deployed within the PSNI, you will appreciate that that is a matter for the Chief Constable. One of the priorities within New Decade, New Approach was to increase police officer numbers to 7,500. I welcome this opportunity to inform Members of the progress that has been made to date on that matter.

However, before I do, I want to correct what has been stated as fact by Mervyn Storey, in previous debates, and by Trevor Clarke and some of his colleagues today, when they said that, in the correspondence, I said that this was not a priority for me. That is not correct. I will share with you what I actually said in a long letter to Mervyn Storey about the three strategic outline cases that were presented to my Department. Let me just quote the letter:

"I met the Finance Minister in February 2020 at one of the bilateral meetings held with each Department, during which the level of pressures from across the Justice family, including the PSNI, was discussed. That meeting also touched on the early indication of NDNA costs that had been provided. I made clear at that meeting that my priority would be the inescapable pressures, in the first instance, as these related to just standing still. Only once these pressures were met

could I consider allocating funding to NDNA-related costs. In the end, the 2020-21 budget allocated to my Department fell short of the funding required to meet all inescapable pressures, and, to date, no additional funding for NDNA commitments has been forthcoming."

So it is not the case that it is not a priority for me, but Members will appreciate that it is necessary that inescapable costs are met first.

With respect to Mr Buchanan's statement, can I also clarify that, in the interview to which he referred, I did not say, as he suggested, that I would not commit to that number of officers. I said that I could not commit to that number unless the funding was made available to my Department. It would have been wrong for me to do otherwise.

Members will be aware that the funding package accompanying New Decade, New Approach falls well short of the amount needed to deliver all the priorities, and sufficient funding for increasing police officer numbers is not currently within my departmental budget. Therefore, it will be for the Executive to make decisions around which priorities are funded and to what extent in this mandate. Having said that, Members will be reassured to know that my Department and I have been working closely with the Department of Finance and PSNI colleagues on progressing the strategic outline case relating to increasing police numbers.

First, I will address the issue of police officer numbers. The figure of 7,500 police officers is not a new one. It was noted as far back as the Patten report on the review of policing in 1999, which said:

"provided the peace process does not collapse and the security situation does not deteriorate significantly from the situation pertaining at present, the approximate size of the police service over the next ten years should be 7,500 full-time officers."

Subsequently, an internal PSNI assessment of its own resilience and capability was carried out in 2013. It concluded that a police officer strength of 6,963 officers was required to deliver policing in Northern Ireland. As of September 2020, the PSNI has 6,991 police officers, full-time equivalent. I understand that the PSNI aims at having 7,000 officers in place by the end of March 2021, within their existing budget envelope.

5.30 pm

Turning to the progress to date in ensuring that increased police officer numbers are represented at Executive level, Members will fully appreciate that it is important that decisions on police numbers are underpinned with sufficient reliable information and an evidence-based assessment, especially given the financial climate within which we operate. It is public-sector funding, after all, and we must satisfy public accountability on this matter. Therefore, the PSNI was advised to bring forward a strategic outline case for consideration.

Members should also be aware that the PSNI has advised that the increase in police numbers is one part of its transformation programme and that all elements are interlinked. The other two elements are additional investment in digital technology and estates transformation and renewal. The PSNI has submitted strategic outline

cases for transformation of the service in each of those three areas. The Department of Justice subsequently submitted the strategic outline case, seeking Department of Finance approval for the PSNI to proceed to outline business case stage for an additional 600 officers, at a cost of £40 million per annum.

My officials are engaging with the PSNI and the Department of Finance on the strategic outline case, as well as the two others on additional investment in digital technology and estates transformation, which have also now been submitted to DOF. These strategic outline cases are subject to approval processes, and all three are being considered by the DOF before approval is granted to allow the PSNI to proceed to the development of outline business cases for each.

I want to assure Members that all parties involved in this work have sought to progress the outline cases in a timely manner. They are potentially significant investments. Estates renewal and transformation is costed at £544 million over 20 years, and digital technology is costed at £89 million over five years. Therefore, if funding is to be made available, it is right that the consideration process is thorough, that value for money is at the heart of our thinking, and that they are submitted to the Department of Finance in a fully justified and robust state.

We also need to understand how the strategic outline business case for increased police officer numbers sits within the context of the overall transformation programme proposed by the Chief Constable. Discussions with the PSNI will include ongoing requirements and operational considerations, which are a matter for the Chief Constable. Any decisions will take into consideration the funding available. At this stage, the total funding envelope available to the Executive for 2021-22 and beyond is not yet known.

As part of the recent information-gathering exercise to inform future budgets, the Department has highlighted the costs associated with the increase to 7,500 officers, noting the ongoing engagement on the strategic outline cases and the considerations, including discussions with PSNI on ongoing requirements and operational considerations, which are a matter for the Chief Constable.

The motion also speaks about better-resourced neighbourhood and local policing teams, and I fully recognise the importance of effective, responsive and visible policing. One of the clearest messages from the consultation on the local policing review in 2018 was the need for a return to a more visible neighbourhood police service. Work to increase officer numbers in that area has already taken place, with 376 additional officers uplifted to neighbourhood policing teams, with a further 24 to be posted, to bring the total number to 713 officers. The benefits of strengthening neighbourhood policing teams have been recognised by policing and community safety partnerships, with whom they work to deliver many of their initiatives.

Neighbourhood officers attend policing and community safety partnership meetings, community safety and antisocial behaviour forums, and support community engagement initiatives, all of which are a critical link with local communities to address fear of crime and community safety issues. I support the increase in officer numbers

in those teams, ahead of any agreement on overall police officer numbers.

The motion also references emerging threats, and there are many, not just criminal, as we have seen with the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, ensuring that organised crime groups are not able to exploit Brexit is an important part of the work. Considerable effort is being put in by PSNI and other agencies, including the Organised Crime Task Force, to militate against that, and I commend them for it.

In anticipation of the new challenges that the Northern Ireland protocol will bring, a new smuggling subgroup has been established to develop a full strategic picture of smuggling in and out of Northern Ireland and Ireland more generally. An analysts' forum has also been established to ensure that the Organised Crime Task Force is well informed about evolving threats. The forum will draw on expert knowledge and insight to inform our collective understanding of the changing organised crime picture in Northern Ireland.

My Department recently consulted on a new Northern Ireland organised crime strategy to protect individuals, communities and businesses. The draft strategy has been informed by and developed in collaboration with the main Organised Crime Task Force partners. Following analysis of the responses and engagement with the Justice Committee, a finalised strategy will be published. The draft strategy acknowledges the breadth of organised criminality and the interdependency of work ongoing in Northern Ireland to tackle paramilitarism and work in other jurisdictions to tackle similar issues.

The dissident threat was raised by a number of Members. An additional £160 million, jointly funded by the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government, was ring-fenced in the last SR period in addition to the main grant funding. Work is ongoing to end paramilitarism. It is an important objective of the Executive. That is reflected in the cross-Executive action plan on tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime. Under the action plan, the PSNI paramilitary crime task force was set up to tackle all forms of crime linked to paramilitaries. I am grateful for the work that it does in targeting groups that seek to control and exploit communities. The action plan also reflects the importance of policing with the community and of collaboration with statutory and voluntary partners. However, tackling —

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Long: I am sorry; I do not have time.

Tackling paramilitarism effectively also requires each of us to address the underlying issues, such as socio-economic factors that make individuals and communities vulnerable to paramilitary influence. The Executive as a whole have a role to play in making that happen. Although this debate is about numbers, it is vital that we use all the resources available to us, including those in partner organisations, to deal with those types of issues, including our partners in the Republic of Ireland and the National Crime Agency (NCA) and a range of other organisations.

I completely agree that there is a need for a representative Police Service. As can be seen from the last recruitment exercise, it is a priority for the police that we have a more representative service. However, Members who

argue for the reintroduction of 50:50 recruitment should be clear that, were that to happen without a significant increase in applications from the minority community, it would potentially reduce the number of officers able to be appointed to the police in any recruitment exercise.

I welcome the amendment that has been tabled. It is right that we should make a case to government for the additional funding for NDNA, which was not presented to us as we expected.

In summing up, I want to be very clear: progress is being made in regard to this matter. I refute the suggestion of inaction. The timeline for the strategic outline case (SOC) is clear and speaks for itself. The first version was submitted by the PSNI on 26 November 2019 to members of the working group on police numbers and transformation for initial feedback. Feedback was then given on 16 December, including on the two other strategic outline cases.

The updated SOC from the PSNI came on 27 January 2020. Further DOJ comments followed on 12 March. There was an updated SOC on police numbers on 30 March. On 10 April 2020, we asked the police to finalise the SOC on numbers and submit it. On 15 April, they did so. The strategic outline case was issued to the Department of Finance on 27 May, after being considered by the Department and obtaining approval from the working group on police numbers and transformation.

On 6 July, PSNI and DOJ colleagues met Department of Finance officials via video link to discuss the SOC. On 5 August, the Department of Finance sent through formal feedback for consideration. On 29 September, an initial response to DOF queries was submitted. On 6 October, the third and final SOC on estates transformation and renewal was sent to the Department of Finance.

To suggest that we are not working on these issues and progressing them is simply not the case. That work takes time, and it is important that the decision is informed by robust deliberations and due accountability. Indeed, the relationship between officer numbers and overtime, which has been referred to, is an area that we specifically invited the PSNI to address in the strategic outline case.

Additional officers have already been funded from a reduction in overtime.

The part-time Reserve (PTR) currently stands at 255 members. The PSNI, at our prompting, has said that it will consider the full range of options in the strategic outline case in response to those questions. However, while the PTR is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, it is worth noting that PTR officers are not much cheaper to recruit and cannot be deployed as flexibly as full-time members.

Notwithstanding the inadequacies of NDNA funding, fiscally, we are in territory that we have never experienced before, and, unfortunately, circumstances will not improve quickly. So, I encourage Members to reflect on the fact that the Executive will, over the coming months and, indeed, years have extremely difficult spending decisions to make and ensure that the overall Budget for the Executive is prioritised accordingly. When Members make demands for spending in any area, they are asking us to reduce spending in another. That is a decision for all Executive Ministers, not just for me as Justice Minister. Some areas

will get funding, and some areas will inevitably lose out, and Members need to remember that when they seek to be critical of those decisions. I am committed to working with my Executive colleagues, including the Minister of Finance, and the Chief Constable to ensure that all aspects of our Police Service are properly resourced for the challenges that it faces.

Ms Kimmins: In winding in support of the amendment, I will summarise the comments made during the debate. My colleague Linda Dillon moved the amendment and highlighted our acceptance of and agreement with the thrust of the motion. She said that we were glad to see the emphasis on neighbourhood and local policing teams as we recognise their importance in tackling the scourge of drug dealing, domestic violence, child sexual exploitation, rural crime, antisocial behaviour and other issues. We have to be realistic that commitment needs resources, and the Sinn Féin amendment adds realism and improves the motion on that basis. Linda also highlighted the fact that it was timely to remind us of the British Government's refusal to pay for other things, including the victims' payment scheme, and she stated that the amendment simply asks that Members support Ministers in going not only to where the money is available but to where the duty is to supply it.

Dolores Kelly spoke in support of the amendment and said that it is disappointing that we are not all on the same page on this. She said that the British Prime Minister recognised the need to invest across England and Wales and that we had hoped for similar recognition for the North. Dolores also spoke about the huge need for greater representativeness and said that there is a challenge in achieving this. She said that more needs to be done right across the piece to recruit from all backgrounds.

Mike Nesbitt spoke against the amendment, stating that NDNA does not say that the Executive commit to asking the British Government for funding. He said that Patten did not recommend 7,500 as a solid figure but as a rough estimate.

John Blair spoke in support of the amendment and addressed the funding shortfall. He said that the motion falls short in addressing the need for collaboration and planning. He highlighted the pressures on the PSNI, acknowledging the extra pressures as a result of COVID from, for example, domestic violence and other issues that have arisen particularly from lockdown. He said that police resourcing is a priority for the Minister and that we should use today to review and refresh our approach to joined-up policing.

Tom Buchanan spoke against the amendment, saying that it is a distraction and takes away from the core issue. He asked the Justice Minister to inform the House of what progress she has made.

My colleague Seán Lynch spoke in support of the amendment and welcomed the renewed focus on this issue. He spoke about representativeness and the need to ensure that all communities are represented by the police who serve them. He said that there should be an ongoing commitment to having in the police more women, more people from ethnic minorities, more LGBT people and more people from working-class backgrounds. He said that all should be more visible in both rank-and-file and leadership roles. He said that partnership with the community and community consent are crucial, and

he highlighted the impact of moving police who had built relationships with communities to other areas. He welcomed the Chief Constable's commitment to minimising extraction. He said that the Sinn Féin amendment reflects the overarching commitment of Policing with the Community to the duties and areas of responsibility of police officers.

Paul Givan highlighted his opposition to the amendment. His view of representativeness was that it was "a stain on this Province". He said that the GAA should be more welcoming of the police.

I take issue with that, because I would like to see examples from the Member of where the GAA has not been welcoming of the police. That is a very strong allegation to make.

5.45 pm

Sinéad Bradley spoke in support of the amendment and stated that COVID had impacted on PSNI resources, particularly from the increase in domestic violence. She also highlighted the impact of Brexit, which is coming down the tracks, and said that, as highlighted by the Chief Constable, the pressures of no deal on the PSNI would be immense. In response to previous comments, Sinéad mentioned how the House agreed to NDNA without significant finances being secured. She asked if we intended to bring every Minister to the House for every item that was agreed as part of NDNA. She said that she did not think that it was valid to say that the amendment is distracting and said that it was steeped in reality.

Alan Chambers spoke in opposition to the amendment, stating that it is useful to have a generous family member when needed. I ask the Member this: are you suggesting that, at this very time, we dip in to much-needed funds for health, the economy, education and our rural and urban communities, which need it more than ever? I put that to the Member.

Kellie Armstrong spoke in support of the amendment —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Kimmins: — to say that we absolutely need more resources, and she highlighted that the Minister had been working hard to get them.

In conclusion, the Minister stated that she has made a lot of progress, and she gave us a comprehensive —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up. I call Joanne Bunting to conclude the debate on the motion. The Member has 10 minutes.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to Members and the Minister for their participation in the debate and for the tenor in which it was conducted. I, too, declare my membership of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. The Member opposite has done some of my work for me, but there were important elements in the debate that should be borne out and reiterated. I think that we are all in agreement and united in the Assembly about the numbers, under-representation and the focus on neighbourhood policing. However, within those, we have some disagreements, and I will come to those.

My colleague opened the debate on the need for a neighbourhood policy in the fight against paramilitarism. He referred to the policing of Brexit, and it is important to remember that we have the UK's only land border with Europe. He also highlighted the fact that the Chief Constable had reiterated the potential to lose a third of the workforce in various waves of COVID.

Ms Dillon proposed the amendment. I am glad that she agrees with the numbers, but the issue is with how we get there. I disagree with her reference to the victims and survivors' pension. We on this side of the House certainly disagree that it is hierarchical. We think that it is not right that victim-makers are treated in the same way as those who suffered at their hands.

Ms Kelly made important points about the business case and said that the Patten numbers mentioned were effective for peacetime. She referred to neighbourhood policing and under-representation. We will slightly disagree on that, because, to our mind, 50:50, as the Minister reiterated, builds in discrimination rather than focusing on merit and could exclude people unnecessarily from the process. I am glad that the Member mentioned how much the police have done to address under-representation. There comes a point where the police can do only so much.

A Member opposite — I think that it was Mr Lynch — made reference to under-representation. As Mr Givan said, the issue with that is that there are barriers to recruitment. Some of those barriers are the threat that is represented in the communities. People have to make a sacrifice by leaving their home and their family and are unable to visit those they love. Those things have to be addressed, and we have to take a political stand and say, "Enough. We will not tolerate this kind of behaviour in our communities any more", and we have to say that being a police officer is a viable career choice.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member take an intervention?

Ms Bunting: If it is brief. I have a lot to get through.

Ms Dillon: I agree with much of what the Member has said. However, I highlight the fact that the ineffectiveness in dealing with legacy in this House and in the British Government has played a big part in the lack of confidence in the PSNI, with people not feeling that they could —.

Ms Bunting: The Member's point is noted.

Mr Nesbitt referred to the transition of the police from a force to a service that engaged in community policing. That is an important transition, and the police are still trying to transition to what policing with the community means. It means different things to different people, and they struggle, as do we on the board, with what it means in practice. He also mentioned paramilitaries and organised crime and the constant fight that there is over the coercion and control that still exists in communities in Northern Ireland.

Mr Blair made relevant points on the challenges that face the PSNI due to COVID and the fact that 999 and 101 calls are back to normal levels. He also raised mental health provision and how, so often, the police — we have discussed this in the House — end up filling the gaps when no one else is there and highlighted the hours that are spent doing that.

Mr Buchanan conducted his speech to music [*Laughter.*] In the course of that speech, he made the point that the budget must be strategic and sustainable.

Mr Lynch referred to under-representation and the fact that the turnover in neighbourhood officers — this is a reasonable point — detracts from building the necessary relationships to get proper intelligence and to build on what is going on in those communities. I am glad that the Chief Constable has taken steps to ensure that, in neighbourhood policing, there is a valid and viable career path.

Mr Givan, as I said, referred to the business case being given the prioritisation that it deserves. He also expressed his views on the barriers to recruitment.

Almost lastly, Ms Bradley discussed the increase in domestic violence. She also said that we had achieved something, which is right: we can look back and say that we have achieved something in how we have learned from each other.

I thank Mr Chambers for his service during dark days in Northern Ireland. He made a valid point about reduced numbers but an increased population.

Mrs Kelly mentioned resources, and the Minister outlined the progress that she had made, to some extent, with the business case and her support for the PSNI.

I will sum up where we are with an overview of the current position, although it is by no means an exhaustive list. Police officer numbers have been reducing consistently year on year. On average, the service loses approximately 5% of police officers each year, mostly through retirement or resignation. We have low numbers of detectives. The July report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) expressed alarm at a likely gap in serious crime investigators in the PSNI. Despite existing recruitment, several specialist departments struggle with workload and capacity, as has been mentioned, namely the rape crime unit and the child abuse and cybercrime teams. We fare badly in comparison with the numbers in other forces. West Yorkshire Police, for example, serve a similar size of population with fewer challenges, yet it has a workforce that numbers more than 400 more officers and staff than the PSNI. As has been mentioned, comparable substantive increases in officer numbers in forces on the back of the PM's July 2019 statement have not been met by equivalent investment in NI. According to the 2017 HMICFRS inspection, we have an ageing workforce. At the time of that inspection, around 20% of police officers were eligible to retire within three years. That is an enormous body of experience that we are about to lose.

The terrorist threat level is at severe. My colleague referred to the demands on policing in Northern Ireland and how they are much different from those that confront most forces in England and Wales. The PSNI faces the ongoing threat from dissident activity. I reiterate that that threat alone accounts for 20% of MI5's budget.

Now we have the pandemic, with the PSNI expected to check and enforce increasing numbers of frequently changing regulations and restrictions on top of all its other usual responsibilities. Add to that the fact that funding to the PSNI, year on year, has been decreasing in both cash and real terms and the absence, as has been mentioned, of a multi-year budget cycle, which denies the PSNI the

opportunity for meaningful longer term strategic planning including on workforce issues. and we wonder why crime outcomes are low.

In May, the Minister informed Mervyn Storey by letter that the 7,500 commitment was not a priority for her because other inescapable pressures needed to be met at that time. In fairness to the Minister, if she will bear with me, she indicated that the money that she was allocated just about allowed her to stand still. It is important that she continues to press the issue with the Finance Minister.

At a time when other obligations are being met in an accelerated fashion, including a medical school at Magee, and I am sure that I have seen a couple of announcements to date about Casement, we need to ensure that the NDNA provisions are implemented in a fair and even-handed way.

Look, I know that the issues are complex and that having additional officers is not a panacea, and I am sure that no one would object to an injection of capital from London — we have pressed for that as much as any other party — but, with all that is going on, it is not coming, so we have to aim to do as much as we can on our own. That is why we will not accept the Sinn Féin amendment, which passes the buck and puts the issue on the long finger.

The Executive have made commitments to the people of Northern Ireland, and it is up to those Ministers to ensure that they cut their cloth accordingly and fulfil the promises that they made in that agreement with one another and with the people, prioritising the things that affect everyone.

Let us be realistic: we all have our pet projects in the NDNA agreement, but the bottom line is that, in circumstances in which money is limited, the things that affect everybody must be taken forward first. It is the things that benefit the whole of society that should and must be prioritised above all else in ministerial budgets. Crime and the fear of crime is one of those things. Everybody signed up to the commitment to additional officers. Feeling safe and being safe is not tribal. It is not a partisan ask. Everybody wants safer streets. Now let us get on with delivering on the NDNA. Additional police officers would be a good starting point.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Clear the Lobbies.

The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that they should continue to uphold social distancing and that those Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come into the Chamber.

Before I put the Question again, I remind Members that, if possible, it would be preferable to avoid a Division.

Question, that the amendment be made, 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 currently has proxy voting arrangements in place. Order. 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 also remind Members that social distancing continues to be observed while the Division is taking place. Please be patient at all times and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 36.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Dillon and Ms Kimmins.

NOES

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 Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr Nesbitt.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon [Teller, Ayes], Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins [Teller, Ayes], 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, Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of effective, responsive and visible policing across Northern Ireland; highlights that better-resourced neighbourhood and local policing teams stand to

improve outcomes in addressing traditional and emerging crime threats, preventing harm and promoting grassroots support for law and order; stresses, moreover, the critical need to ensure the Police Service of Northern Ireland is appropriately resourced to deal with the enduring threat of terrorism and paramilitary activity; welcomes, to this end, the Executive commitment contained in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) to increase police officer numbers to 7,500; expresses deep concern that the costs of delivering the full range of priorities set out in New Decade, New Approach are far in excess of the funding package provided by the British Government; and calls on the British Government to provide adequate funding to take forward the New Decade, New Approach priorities, which will enable the Executive to honour and implement the commitment to enhanced local police numbers by the end of this Assembly mandate.

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

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 7 October 2020, you wrote to me about a remark that I made during a debate held on 6 October 2020. You pointed out that, even though I had made it clear in the debate that I was quoting someone else's remark, your ruling was that, even in that situation, it could be deemed offensive to quote what someone else had said. Mr Speaker, can you confirm that, the following day, immediately on receipt of your letter, I wrote to you to acknowledge your ruling on the issue and to withdraw the remark immediately?

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Wells, for that point of order. Earlier today, when the issue was raised in a point of order, I made it very clear that I had, in fact, written to you and that — I think that I used these words — to be fair, you had replied within an hour to withdraw your remarks and to apologise for any offence caused. OK, Mr Wells? I now consider the matter closed. Thank you.

Suspension of Standing Order 10(3A)

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 12 October 2020 be extended to no later than 9.00pm. — [Mr Butler.]

Private Members' Business

The European Union/United Kingdom Withdrawal Agreement

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the British Government's stated intention, in breach of international law, to renege on elements of the EU/UK withdrawal agreement; urges the European Council to stand by, fully, the EU/UK withdrawal agreement as agreed; and calls on the European Council to require the British Government to implement fully the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. Please open the debate on the motion.

Dr Archibald: I support the amendment.

Later this week, on 15 October, the European Council will meet, and Brexit will be one of the items for discussion. In advance of that meeting, today's motion calls for the European Council to stand by, fully, the withdrawal agreement, as agreed by the European Union and British Government, and to require the British Government to fully implement the protocol.

That Council meeting should have been a key staging post in the finalisation of the future arrangements, but, as we are all only too aware, having debated it at length in the Chamber, the negotiation process, which had been moving at a snail's pace was somewhat upended at the beginning of September by the Internal Market Bill. That Bill, as has also been well discussed, breaches the withdrawal agreement and protocol and undermines devolution and the Good Friday Agreement.

Thankfully, though, for our businesses, communities and economy, the negotiations have continued, but we all know that significant gaps remain, in particular in fisheries, the level playing field and state aid, as has been the case for many weeks. There was some speculation over the weekend about very tentative progress, but we in the North very much need to see those negotiations intensify towards a positive outcome.

When the Internal Market Bill was published on 8 September, Boris Johnson unhelpfully set 15 October as a deadline for reaching agreement on a trade deal. Short of a miracle breakthrough, it seems highly unlikely that that will happen. It remains to be seen how that will be navigated, but it needs to be. We are only 80 days away from the end of the transition period; that is all that is left to secure a deal on future arrangements and to get it ratified through the Parliaments. That, too, is all that is left for businesses and other organisations to prepare for whatever future arrangements are agreed and for them to be ready to implement those arrangements on 1 January.

We have heard from business organisations and civil servants that the likelihood of being prepared and ready to implement the arrangements is decreasing by the day to the point of near impossibility. I said last week and I will say it again that the future arrangements negotiations are

the only show in town. The focus needs to be on resolving the outstanding issues and being ready to implement the technicalities of the protocol.

We are five weeks on from the publication of the Internal Market Bill, and there has been no discernible progress on key questions such as the definition of at-risk goods, what declarations will be required and in what context, what the labelling requirements will be and what sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks will look like. For a Bill that was supposed to give certainty, it is failing dismally.

There is also no tangible progress on other issues that were envisaged as being part of the future arrangements discussions, including arrangements for EU citizens who cross the border to work and are facing uncertainty about what their status will be or what they have to apply for. There are other things, too, that will have an impact on people's everyday life, with added bureaucracy. Those include pet passports, green cards for car insurance, roaming charges and whether we can still access the European health insurance card.

What can young people expect with student fees for studying in the South or other EU states beyond next year? Will they be able to have access to ERASMUS+? What will be the arrangements for universities, research institutes and business organisations to have future access to EU research programmes? Those are just some of the things that we still have no clarity on 80 days out from the end of the transition period.

There are those in the Chamber and elsewhere over the past few weeks who have tried to spread the blame for the lack of progress as though the British Government had been caught unawares by an intransigent EU, but that simply does not stack up. Britain joined the then European Economic Community in 1973, and it has been at the centre of the EU's institutions since then. Britain is well aware of the EU's approach to managing its interstate relations and negotiations such as these. Indeed, it has been involved in and party to such negotiations.

When the British Government signed up to the withdrawal agreement ahead of further negotiations on future arrangements, they were well aware that they would be held to implementing the agreement. Yet, some in the Administration have spent the last year trying to negotiate their way out, culminating in the publication of the Internal Market Bill. In doing so, the British Government and Tory Ministers have again shown complete disregard for our peace, our economy and the businesses, jobs and livelihood of people across this island. They have prioritised their narrow interests and a fantasy of light-touch regulatory arrangements that favour business interests above all else over the interests of people and communities here.

It is still difficult to discern the intent behind the Internal Market Bill and whether they are trying to force the EU's hand in negotiation or, rather, disingenuously trying to unilaterally disapply parts of the withdrawal agreement. In reality, though, it does not make any material difference because the outcome is the same: breaching trust and making the negotiations more difficult rather than constructively engaging.

Over the past few weeks, as we have debated the Internal Market Bill, some Members have tried to suggest that the British Government were acting within their rights and that

the parliamentary sovereignty clause in the withdrawal agreement allows for such actions. Indeed, Mr Stafford and Mr Allister cited legal opinion supporting that claim. However, a bit like statistics, you will always find something that will support your view.

6.30 pm

There is plenty of legal opinion and analysis that disputes those assertions, including from the Institute for Government, which, in commenting on the withdrawal agreement, states:

"The bill also 'recognises' that Parliament is sovereign ... However, this 'parliamentary sovereignty' clause is unlikely to have any legal effect."

It further states:

"The most likely outcome of this is that if, in future, Parliament passed a statute inconsistent with the agreement, the courts would disapply the statute in favour of the agreement".

The House of Commons Library's analysis states:

"Clause 36 on Parliamentary sovereignty is of doubtful legal significance."

It further states:

"The use of the phrase 'it is recognised' in the clause ... suggests this is a political statement about the UK's constitutional norms rather than a new justiciable rule."

It has been described as political window dressing.

The only real way to test that would be in court, and that may yet come. The European Commission has actioned legal proceedings against the British Government in relation to the Internal Market Bill, so far on the basis of the breach of the good faith articles in the withdrawal agreement. It remains to be seen how things progress and what action the British Government will take on the Internal Market Bill. It is clear, though, that they should remove the clauses that breach the withdrawal agreement.

It is against that backdrop of legal action, and the unhelpful Boris Johnson deadline, that negotiations continue and the European Council meets this week. That difficult mood music and slow negotiation progress have led to this motion. As I have said time and again, the best scenario for the protocol to operate effectively is in the context of a comprehensive free trade deal. That is still what we hope will be achieved, even in the challenging time frame that we face. However, if we are looking at a no-deal outcome, it is an imperative that the protections in the protocol are implemented to protect our economy, communities and peace agreements. All efforts need to be maintained to reach an agreement on future arrangements, and the British Government need to be held to the commitments that they have made.

In advance of the European Council meeting, I call on the Assembly to send a clear message that the withdrawal agreement and protocol must be upheld to protect our businesses and communities and the Good Friday Agreement. Therefore, I urge Members to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Dickson: I beg to move the following amendment:

At end insert:

“; and further calls on the UK Government and the European Union to work constructively within the context of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to put in place any waivers, mitigations and flexibilities necessary to make its implementation as light touch as possible.”

Mr Speaker: The Member will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

Mr Dickson: For the past number of weeks, we have been debating a range of motions on the same topic. The Alliance Party supported all of those motions to demonstrate its dismay at the United Kingdom Government's apparent willingness to break international law in the form of the provisions of the Internal Market Bill — a breach of law that they have freely admitted to.

In proposing our amendment, my colleague Mr Muir and I seek to make a constructive change to the motion to give it a more-specific direction and to seek greater clarity for the businesses and people who we in the Assembly are here to serve in such uncertain times.

It is important to continue to acknowledge that much still needs to be defined by the United Kingdom Government and the EU on what the rules and requirements will be on the specific movement of goods across the United Kingdom and Ireland. That includes specific goods such as medicines and fishing and other issues that were raised by my colleague in her speech on the motion.

The power to implement such a light-touch, mutually beneficial, lower-friction system is entirely in the hands of the UK and EU. I really hope that all Members can join us and support the amendment, which calls on the EU and the United Kingdom to engage constructively to avoid an unnecessarily heavy burden on businesses and our community. Let us hope that someone in government, and in Brussels, is listening. I also hope that this debate can be less acrimonious than some of the previous debates, one that can draw support from across the House.

We all appreciate that the protocol is not ideal. It is the outcome of the Government's desire to take the United Kingdom away from the EU. Many, especially here in Northern Ireland, would have viewed a softer Brexit, with the United Kingdom continuing within the single market and/or the customs union, as an appropriate way forward. Nonetheless, the protocol was agreed, and, in the context of such desired divergence, an election campaign was run on it, and Parliament passed it. I cannot accept the supposed aim that the Government are doing this for our own good: that is, that it is a safety net for the Good Friday Agreement. I do welcome the DUP's new-found support for the agreement nonetheless.

Rather, this intervention has the potential to undermine the Good Friday Agreement by putting the whole protocol at risk. The United Kingdom Government seem to have a perception that agreements do not need to be followed and that reality does not need to be acknowledged. The Government appear to be unable to reconcile their desired outcome with the world today. They are thus taking a chaotic and confusing approach to the negotiations, with contradictory and unrealistic aims.

We need to leave behind those manoeuvrings and negotiating tactics, however. Businesses need certainty in a very uncertain time, when a multitude of serious concerns still face us. We need good faith in both London and Brussels. There needs to be realism, because there must be definite room for a lighter touch on the implementation of the protocol. On export declarations, for example, there is potential for waivers for goods moving from Northern Ireland to GB. It is understandable that the European Union needs to take action to protect the single market and the customs union, even more so, given, regrettably, the bad faith shown by the United Kingdom Government. Ultimately, however, that is not required for the integrity of the EU single market or the customs union, so, with good faith and engagement between the parties, wide-ranging waivers could be possible.

On fisheries, fish landed in Northern Ireland is not covered by the protocol, but there is surely the potential, separate from the wider UK negotiations on fisheries with the EU, to include the issue in the protocol. Medicine supply chains flow through the UK generally. That presents us with issues of labelling and batch-testing, as those medicines will leave the EU and move into Northern Ireland. Clearly, the best and simplest solution to that is a mutual recognition agreement on medicines between the UK and the EU.

Then, of course, there is the goods-at-risk challenge on goods travelling from the UK that could end up in the EU. At present, the default is that all goods will be deemed to be at risk, with tariffs to be paid and then rebated if the goods end their journey in Northern Ireland. That could impact seriously on businesses and consumers. Of course, if the UK were to negotiate a favourable zero-tariff and zero-quota future relationship, that challenge would almost disappear. In the absence of the great deal that we were promised, a far-reaching set of exemptions is needed for Northern Ireland-destined goods in order to protect supply chains and consumers. Again, we need the UK and the EU to engage in good faith on that, and I believe that that is possible.

Northern Ireland has managed a compromise that may see us avoid the very worst effects of Brexit. It is not perfect, as compromises rarely are, but there is room here to make arrangements as light-touch as possible. The United Kingdom must seek the best possible arrangement for Northern Ireland, preferably a comprehensive zero-tariff, zero-quota trade agreement and not accept a no deal, which we are told would be a good outcome. Those who call for the UK just to walk away and accept a disastrous no deal need to realise that the issue will be worse than settled. The UK will need to continue to trade with our nearest neighbours. It is the hard reality of the geography that will intervene. Exporting dairy products, beef or eels to the Netherlands and France is a far more realistic and competitive situation for us than our exporting to New Zealand or Canada. Furthermore, the reality is that dairy products from New Zealand do not cross the EU multiple times before going to market, as we see here.

Brexit risks upsetting the Northern Ireland balance, but that has come about through the choices made by the United Kingdom Government to break away from the European Union in such a dramatic way, and one that was not even proposed in the referendum. Unfortunately, it is happening to us whether we like it or not. We have to make the best of it, and the protocol needs to be implemented.

It is, however, within the power of the UK Government and the EU to call on those with the power over our futures to act in our best interests and to stop posturing.

Clearly, friction in trade will increase as a result of a hard Brexit. We should not allow this to increase division and tensions at a time when we are coming together to protect businesses and people in Northern Ireland. That is the purpose of what we are trying to achieve today.

These arrangements need to be in place well before the end of the year — time is running out — to give businesses certainty and to ensure a culture of compliance from day one. We must do all in our power to prevent a chaotic end to the transition period for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland needs to be put on a clear legal footing for the future, with the lightest possible touch on checks to keep goods flowing across the British Isles as freely as possible. Businesses need certainty and stability, no matter what your view is on Brexit. We must all ensure that a black market is not enabled to take advantage of the lack of trading arrangements, undermine our legitimate Northern Ireland businesses and, regrettably, fund organised crime.

I hope that Members will join us today in calling on the EU and the United Kingdom Government to reach a good outcome. I encourage Members to support our amendment.

Mr Stalford: This is becoming a bit of a pattern. This is now, I think, the fourth week in which we have been discussing something related to the Brexit process. Having gone through four years of Remainer hissy fits, a few more motions in front of the Northern Ireland Assembly are hardly to be feared, but I do think that this does the House a disservice. I have in front of me the speaking notes from the last motion on this, and Members could probably simply read out the same speech that they delivered last week and just put that into Hansard again. So repetitious has the argument become that I think this particular horse has been flogged as much as it can stand. However, Members are within their rights to bring any motion that they wish, no matter how repetitious and boring it may be.

The wording of the motion is interesting. It refers to calling upon:

“the European Council to require the British Government”.

Here is the thing: we are not in that club any more. Europe cannot require anything of us that we choose not to give it, and I think that the country is better off for that. No longer will people whom we did not elect be making the laws that govern us, dictating to us how to conduct trade or ruling our lives.

This protocol is bad for Northern Ireland. It is bad for Northern Ireland business, and, no matter how much the Member for East Antrim shakes his head, that is the reality. No person can stand on their feet and say that they are defending their constituents' best interests if, at the same time, they support the protocol. No elected Member of the House should have the brass neck or the gall to face local businesses and tell them that they are defending their interests whilst simultaneously supporting a measure that puts a blockage on the biggest market that Northern Ireland has — the GB market. It is a fallacy to say that you are supporting local business whilst, at the same time, supporting barriers to local business. No matter how

often the Members stand on their feet and repeat the lines over and over, it will not make them true. The protocol is bad for Northern Ireland business because it hives us off *[Interruption.]* I am happy to give way if the Member wants me to.

Mr Dickson: I would just like to ask the Member a very simple question: whose fault is it that we have the protocol? It is here because we started out with your party's opposition to dragging us out of the European Union. It is as simple as that.

Mr Stalford: Dragging us out of the European Union? It is called a democratic referendum.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stalford: Thank you.

Dragging us out of the European Union? Every citizen of the United Kingdom had an equal vote.

From John o'Groats — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr Stalford: From John o'Groats to Land's End, from London to Strabane, every citizen of the United Kingdom had an equal vote and an equal say in that referendum, and the people elected to leave the European Union, including a majority in the constituency of East Antrim, Mr Dickson *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

6.45 pm

Mr Stalford: The people elected, in a UK-wide referendum and in a free and fair contest, and they made their decision. What followed was four years of foot-dragging by a Remain vanguard that dragged the country through the courts and kept it going through this psychodrama because they were not prepared to accept the outcome of the referendum and did everything in their power to quash that outcome.

As has been said, we are now 80 days away from seeing that outcome fulfilled. I support the content of the Internal Market Bill because I want the best for my constituents. I do not want trade barriers up the middle of our country. For anyone who defends the protocol, that is precisely what you want and precisely what you will deliver for your constituents.

Those who are beholden to the Northern Ireland protocol ignore the existential threat to household prosperity that it will cause. Why? Because their fealty to the idea of the European Union is more important to them than the wealth and prosperity of their constituents. They are still fighting the battle of 2016, which they lost, and they cannot accept that. They are determined almost to try to punish the country for having the temerity to leave the European Union. Some elected people who are supposed to represent the interests of their constituents want to see them actively punished for daring to vote to leave the mighty European Union. Well, that is for them to justify.

I want the best outcome for my constituents, and the best outcome for them will be secured through free trade and access to the largest market to which we have access: the GB market. If Mr Dickson wants to shake his head to a statement of obvious fact, that is for him, but, much like

the Remainers that we have seen during and since the referendum, he cannot hold back the tide for ever.

Mr O'Toole: We have debated Brexit and the UK Internal Market Bill several times over the past few weeks; indeed, I have tabled motions on them. I see that my colleague from South Belfast is leaving the Chamber, no doubt before I get the opportunity to remind him that the constituency of South Belfast, which we both serve proudly, overwhelmingly and proudly voted Remain.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I am happy to give way if he wants to correct me on that point.

Mr Stalford: Unlike the Member, I was elected by the people of South Belfast *[Laughter.]*

Mr O'Toole: I am glad that the Member is —.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has an additional minute.

Mr O'Toole: That is a fair point. I suggest that we should give the people of South Belfast another referendum on the question of Northern Ireland's membership of the European Union. I am happy to do that, and we will see how it goes.

We have debated Brexit and the Internal Market Bill several times over the last few weeks. Despite what some Members, including my colleague from South Belfast, think, it is critical that we continue to debate Brexit, not least because people in Northern Ireland voted Remain and, secondly, because it is critical to the future of our economy.

Several months ago, we debated a motion that called for an extension of the Brexit transition period. As Caoimhe Archibald said, that transition period will end in 80 days. Given what we know about the state of the pandemic in Northern Ireland and what it will inflict on our society and economy in the next few months, I do not think that anybody could credibly argue that we should not have the transition period extended. It is immoral that the UK Government have not extended it thus far.

The meat of the motion and the amendment, both of which we will support, is about, first, the actions of the UK Government in resiling from their commitments under international law and, secondly, a call in the amendment that the UK and the EU should use their best endeavours to strike a deal and make the operation of the withdrawal agreement and the protocol as workable as possible for businesses and workers in Northern Ireland. Of course, we support that.

Let us first be absolutely clear: the withdrawal agreement, which is an international treaty lodged at the EU, places legally binding obligations on the UK Government and the EU to deliver. The Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol, to give it its legal name, is no one's ideal outcome. Why does it exist? It exists because of Brexit. Brexit is the thing that people here did not ask for. Despite the enthusiasm of Christopher Stalford and others on the Benches opposite, we did not ask to leave the European Union. Brexit creates specific and significant challenges for our society and economy, given our geography, our complicated history and our institutions. Anyone who downplays that and turns this into a Remainer or Leaver psychodrama is, I am afraid, not properly engaging with the nature of Northern Ireland or its unique challenges. The protocol has to be

implemented, but it is no one's ideal first choice. The ideal first choice for this society and economy was membership of the European Union. It is worth saying that, in my view, that was by far the best scenario and outcome for the whole of the UK, for everyone who lives on these islands and, indeed, beyond them.

It is important that the protocol be implemented in a way that works for people here. The way to do that was for the United Kingdom to have clearly demonstrated to the European Union that it was serious about implementing the protocol, engaging in implementing it and doing it via the Joint Committee and elsewhere. Unfortunately, that has not happened yet. That has severely damaged trust, and that damaged trust has led to the initiation of legal action by the European Commission. I am afraid that that was inevitable, given that the European Union is, after all, a legal order. Secondly, it has led to a breakdown of trust in the negotiations for a free trade agreement. Let no one be in any doubt that a comprehensive free trade agreement between the UK and the EU is in everyone's interests, but it is particularly in the interests of Northern Ireland's businesses and society more broadly. If we have, as others have mentioned, a zero-tariff, zero-quota arrangement between the UK and the EU, that will lead to more workable arrangements for Northern Ireland. It will still not answer all the challenges. It will still lead to a very clunky set of trading relationships between the UK and the EU, and it still will not solve all the challenges that we will have on this island. It will not address the fact that we will not have access to services across this island in the way that we did. We do not have answers yet to all the unanswered questions, some of which were touched on by Caoimhe Archibald.

None of us wanted to be in this position, debating, less than three months from the end of the transition period, a possible cliff edge for our businesses in the teeth of the worst pandemic in a century. No one wants to be here debating it, but I am afraid that being here and debating it is one of the few ways that we have of demonstrating to the UK and to the EU the seriousness of the situation that we find ourselves in and the clear will of people here to have the protocol delivered and to have a deal between the UK and the EU that minimises the impact of this godawful thing — Brexit — on our economy and our society.

Mr Beggs: I oppose the motion and the amendment. The Ulster Unionist Party will support neither. We encourage those who wish to see balance in the negotiations to reject them. They are not being helpful. They are not helping things, and they are not allowing us to move forward.

First of all, Ulster Unionists reject the Government of Boris Johnson and are disappointed that they signed up to a Northern Ireland protocol — a flawed protocol in the first place — and then saw fit to disavow the provisions immediately afterwards. That is not good practice, but it should never have been agreed in the first place. Let us remember that the Northern Ireland protocol breached the Belfast Agreement: there was no consent from the unionist community, and it changed our status in the United Kingdom. It is unionists who have been offended by the Northern Ireland protocol, and nationalists need to understand that. They need to understand that we have been diminished by the protocol and the Belfast Agreement has been diminished. That is being ignored by nationalists.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I do not agree with the argument that he makes, but, if what he is saying is true, does he also accept that Brexit is, by definition, a breach of the Good Friday Agreement?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Beggs: The fundamental decision in the Belfast Agreement was that any change to the status of Northern Ireland would be done with the agreement of the people of Northern Ireland: a cross-community agreement. That is not what has happened. Northern Ireland has moved to a halfway house, with a border down the Irish Sea, making us different and, unless that can be quickly resolved, causing major disruption to our trade.

I also draw attention to the fact that we have a debate of this type almost weekly. It has become monotonous, and at the same time we have Brit-bashing.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I have already given way.

At the same time, the hand goes out looking for more money. You Brit-bash in one debate and look for more money in another debate. That is not good politics; it is grandstanding.

The language that we have heard in the debate today may be deemed acceptable from a party whose whole existence is based on the destruction of the United Kingdom — in the past, certainly, by whatever means. That is not acceptable in a modern way. It is not acceptable to unionists and should not be acceptable to anybody in the Chamber. I have to ask the SDLP, the Greens and, indeed, the Alliance Party whether the continuation of the, quite frankly, unbalanced assault on one side of the debate is in the interests of their constituents, all our constituents and everyone in Northern Ireland. It is fruitless and is going nowhere, rather than asking all sides of the dispute to draw back. Members should use their best endeavours to help our businesses, farmers, supermarkets and consumers, who are now looking at a potential 5% hike in electricity. That is where we should be, but, for some reason, that is not where we are.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr Beggs: I will give way.

Mr Dickson: I genuinely appreciate what the Member said about the debates that have taken place; I said that in my speech. However, the amendment is about encouraging the United Kingdom Government and the EU to bring about a compromised agreement and to allow us to do exactly what Mr Beggs wants us to do: support our businesses and move forward.

Mr Beggs: The amendment supports the Northern Ireland protocol, which no unionist can support. It cuts us off from the rest of the United Kingdom through trade barriers and restrictions on the movement of goods. The Alliance Party has failed to recognise that. For some reason, it seems to have taken more direction from the Northern Ireland Office.

Rather than attempting to bring commonality to the debate, we have been wasting time throwing insults across the Chamber. We need to move forward. I agree with Mr Dickson that we need to ensure a light touch, but the flawed protocol, which should never have been agreed,

needs to be rethought, and the debate should not be restricted by them.

Several commentators have said that the Assembly has been tabling and supporting anti-UK motions on a monotonous and insulting basis. It goes on and on. It is majoritarianism involving Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Alliance Party on its worst basis. There has been a failure to seek cross-community support that everyone can gather round. We need to move forward constructively. We need to think about what is deliverable. We need to think of the other. We need to make sure that we have free trade east-west and North/South. That should not be restricted by the flawed Northern Ireland protocol, which has created much of the problem. I ask everyone to reflect on that and to see how we can go forward constructively together rather than having these repetitive and monotonous debates that happen over and over again on largely the same subject.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 25, I want to move that the Question be now decided. This is the fourth successive week in which we have repetitively debated the issue. Each of the five main parties has again had the opportunity to contribute. In accordance with Standing Order 25, I move that the Question be now put on the amendment and the motion.

7.00 pm

Mr Speaker: On your point of order, Mr Allister, I do not believe that it is appropriate to curtail the debate. I remind the Member that the Business Committee selected the motion for debate. The motion is clearly valid. I also point out, Mr Allister, that you have a representative on the Business Committee. That Member, who represents your interests, supported the motion going forward for debate today. On that basis, I am satisfied that it is not reasonable to curtail the debate.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, may I ask you, Mr Speaker, to look at the terms of Standing Order 25? It is precisely for this situation. It says:

“After ‘the question’ of a motion has been proposed, any member who has not already spoken to it, or to any amendment to it which has been proposed, may move that ‘the question be now decided’, and unless it shall appear to the Speaker that any of the parties present has not had a reasonable opportunity to contribute to the debate or that such motion is otherwise an abuse of these orders, the question that ‘the question be now decided’ shall be put immediately and decided without amendment or debate.”

Every party has had such opportunity. For four weeks, parties have had the opportunity, which is repeated today. I really do press upon you that Standing Order 25 is made for precisely this situation, if it is the will of the House. Of course, if it is not the will of the House, the debate will proceed. If it is, the matter should move to the votes.

Mr Speaker: In fact, it is not entirely due to this particular set of circumstances that that Standing Order is in place. I make the point that, if we were to use repetition as the reason for curtailing debate, you may well find that quite a number of debates in the House would be suitable for curtailment. The Standing Order provides:

“unless it shall appear to the Speaker that any of the parties present has not had a reasonable opportunity”.

As far as I am concerned, if the debate were to be curtailed, and the motion that you propose were to be successful, there would be no further responses and no further winding-up speeches. I do not believe that that would be a reasonable outcome. Other Members are entitled to express their views. This is a timed motion, it was passed by the Business Committee, and it is valid. On that basis, we will continue the debate.

Mr Givan: As Members have said, this is the fourth such motion in as many weeks. Notwithstanding that, we will go through with debating it. I commend Dr Archibald: she has tremendous power and influence within Sinn Féin to be able to have this motion brought back again. Remind me, Mr Speaker, never to cross the Member for East Londonderry. We could debate issues such as how we restore our health service or support the arts in this current climate, or the future of manufacturing and so on. Instead, we go back to the Brexit debate. If we are keeping score, Sinn Féin may be ahead of the SDLP now, so we will need to get another motion from the SDLP to counteract that.

Members have rehearsed their arguments at length in their detailed contributions, so I do not intend to rehearse some of mine. It is important, though, to point out that, when we take the United Kingdom to task for its breaches, let us also apply the same standard to the European Union, for example. In recent weeks, it has been well documented that the European Central Bank was deemed to have broken German law. Let us see whether there is an attempt by Germany to bring the European Central Bank into line using the relevant European Union procedures.

Look at the European protocols when it comes to the rights of citizens to participate in voting their members into the relevant legislature. Article 2 of protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights makes it clear that citizens should be able to vote their people in. That is not the case in Northern Ireland, though. We will be denied that right. I am not advocating that, but, if we are to hold to that principled position, the Member should be advocating that Northern Ireland be allowed to elect people to the European Parliament because it will still be subject to the rules of the European Union. We will take on the rules but not have the ability to influence them. I have not heard how that protocol is being applied.

Members rehearsed article 1 of the Northern Ireland protocol, which is creating the issue, particularly for unionists. Article 1 of the Northern Ireland protocol states that the agreement should be:

“without prejudice to the provisions of the 1998 Agreement”.

That takes us back to the arguments that that agreement ensures that Northern Ireland will remain an integral part of the United Kingdom until such a time as a majority of people vote otherwise. That has not happened yet. It may well in the future, but it has not happened. Therefore, the very Northern Ireland protocol should reflect Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom. That takes you back to the 1800 Act of Union, which enshrines equality of treatment for its citizens in the component parts of the UK and says that we should not have any customs barriers in place. We are now going to have customs barriers in place, so it flies in the face of the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, for the EU, this was never about protecting peace and economic prosperity in Northern Ireland? In fact, it was never about the people of Northern Ireland. It has always been about using Northern Ireland as a means to punish the UK and to drive it to the negotiating table under its terms and conditions. It is the standardised approach to negotiating 101 by the European Union.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Member is right. That point was made before. The French will care more about access to the UK's coastal waters than they will about what happens on the island of Ireland. That is going to be the harsh reality, so the EU is using the protocol as leverage within a much bigger game plan.

That takes us to the question of what we can do. In the previous debate, the Member for Upper Bann Mr O'Dowd talked a lot about the question, "What can we do?". He said that unionism is let down consistently by the British Government. I agree. We have been let down on countless occasions, and that is why I am a devolutionist, not an integrationist. That is why I believe in Stormont. He said that Dr Paisley and Martin McGuinness moved to kick out the then Secretary of State. That was a good decision, and I would have done the same. I was not the biggest fan of Peter Hain, and I was not sad to see him go. I agree that we can do much more together on the issues that affect all our people than either London or Dublin can do for this jurisdiction.

That is why it concerns me that there is a repetition of the same debate and the same motion in this place going round in a circular way. We are generating plenty of heat and not a lot of light. That is where we need to get to. I ask myself this: why did Sinn Féin get to the point where it did not support an elitist European Union? It never supported the unaccountable type of system that Europe is. It is much further away from the people, so it is less democratically accountable. Why does Sinn Féin support an institution that big business can access, as opposed to the ordinary man and woman in the street? It is a dictatorial European Union, where the smaller member states are subjected to the rule of the big countries. Why did Sinn Féin decide that it would no longer hold that position? Of course, it is because of the single agenda that it pursues: the reunification of Ireland. Its position "evolved", as Mr O'Dowd said, so that it could change positions.

My party's position has never changed. Mr O'Dowd said that, in 2016, we did not know what we were doing. Anyone who has followed DUP history and what Dr Paisley stood for will know that he topped the poll on no fewer than five occasions in every election, much to the dismay of some Members opposite. He beat every contender in those elections. I think that the DUP position on Europe has been very clear right from the foundational days of our party.

Let us try to find a space where we can come together and not beat each other about over these debates again. Hopefully, this will be the last of it. You will win the vote. The SDLP, Alliance and Sinn Féin will defeat us again. Well done. Let us, hopefully, move on and get to a place where we can find a way forward that benefits all our people.

Ms Sheerin: I will address your comment, which I know was meant in a disparaging tone, about the influence that Dr Archibald has in our party. Caoimhe, like me, is an elected member of the Sinn Féin ard-chomhairle, so she does hold quite a bit of influence in Sinn Féin. We are a democratic party, and this is something that is important to us all.

Contributors across the Chamber, including you, remarked on how repetitive this conversation is. This year has seen all of us lurch from one crisis to another. Brexit fatigue is now so 2019. It has been compounded by COVID fatigue in 2020. As boring as this might be for some, the reality is that, much like when you are talking to a petulant child, when you are speaking with the British Government, you sometimes have to repeat yourself. As for the accusation of Brit-bashing, this is not personal for us with the Tories. It is personal for our constituents and for the communities that we all represent.

It is no secret that my party's position is that Ireland would be better off without the involvement of Britain in our affairs, but to portray the conversation that we are having as an opportunity to vent is insulting. It is insulting to all the people on the ground who worry about the impact that leaving the EU will have on their daily life. We are in a mess that is not of our making. We did not vote for Brexit, but we are where we are. We are getting dragged out against the will of the majority in the North. Our position now should be about how we can make the best of a bad situation. As the saying goes, "Half a loaf is better than no bread".

Last winter, every evening, we all tuned in to a soap with far greater drama and far less predictability than anything that even the most seasoned of scriptwriters could have delivered. The House of Commons in London became the scene of a "Will they? Won't they?" that would challenge any romantic comedy with vote after vote on the withdrawal agreement. The withdrawal agreement that we finally saw signed off, whilst not perfect — remember that this relates to Brexit, so perfection is not something that is attainable —

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sheerin: No, thank you.

— provided us with some assurances. The implementation of the protocol meant two big-ticket items for the North of Ireland, both of which have been spoken about at length and neither of which we can afford to lose.

The first of those items is the non-diminution of rights principle. That is not just something that is very difficult to say; it is a guarantee from the British Government that they will not roll back on the rights mentioned in the "Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity" section of the Good Friday Agreement. If the non-diminution principle is the belt, the dedicated mechanism would serve as the braces. It consists of the granting of funding and additional powers to human rights organisations already working in the North to hold the UK Government to their promise. Unfortunately, before we got that far, we could see the British Government reneging and abandoning the protections offered in the protocol through the Internal Market Bill.

The Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission have advised that the proposed amendments undermine the 1998 commitment to incorporate the

European Convention on Human Rights. Worryingly, the Internal Market Bill may allow the British Government to opt out of many of the EU directives that have protected rights that we have become accustomed to in the North. Those rights ensure equality of access to opportunity and services regardless of background or ability. Our buy-in, North and South, to the European Convention means that we have harmonisation of certain schemes that impact on the life of anyone with a disability. If you are a driver with a disability and require accessible parking so that you can go to the pharmacy or the supermarket without any trouble, you are entitled to a blue badge, and that holds equal weight across EU states. If you live in Derry, Newry or Aghnacloy and sometimes nip across the border for your groceries or to get fuel, you know that your blue badge will be recognised and you do not have to do anything extra before commencing your errands. For a section of society that is already at a disadvantage, any further bureaucracy, form filling and chopping and changing between different systems, depending on the jurisdiction that you are in, will lead to frustration and further exclusion.

Another example is the use of pharmaceutical Braille, which is consistent across states via an EU directive. It means that those with visual impairments can buy medicine North and South and expect to find the same Braille on the packaging. If we lose such an EU directive, rural dwellers buying paracetamol or Calpol for their children will be confronted with different instructions depending on whether they buy it in Stranorlar or Strabane. That is another complication that no one will welcome.

If we are to have a just society, it is imperative that our most protected rights are those of our most vulnerable. The protocol went some way to ensuring that. I do not regard it as Brit-bashing to ask that that is upheld.

Mr Buckley: Mr Speaker, forgive me for being repetitious in some of my comments. For weeks on end, the House has been subjected to the same artificial hysteria from Sinn Féin and other parties on the European Union/United Kingdom withdrawal agreement and the Internal Market Bill. We hear the same old lines, such as “breaking international law”; “breaching the terms and conditions of the Belfast Agreement”; “acting in bad faith”; and “ignoring the democratic will of the people of Northern Ireland”. The list could go on. I even heard a Sinn Féin Member speak about the disastrous economic impact on Northern Ireland of the actions taken by the British Government.

Come on, Mr Speaker. Really? Is there any self-awareness in the party opposite? Sinn Féin is giving itself almost as much carte blanche as it did in last week's debate when it called for respect for the rule of law.

7.15 pm

Many Members who sit on the Benches opposite and their party not only acquiesced but gave cover to the very bombs that blew the economic heartbeat out of our towns and cities across Northern Ireland, including Portadown, Lurgan and Banbridge in my constituency of Upper Bann, destroying lives, livelihoods and economic viability for decades. It was left to Her Majesty's Government to rebuild and pick up the tab. One can therefore forgive unionist Members in the House for coming to the conclusion that this is nothing but artificial hysteria from Sinn Féin.

If I had been allowed to intervene earlier, I would have said that, if Brexit and the Internal Market Bill meant so much to Sinn Féin, as they have said that it does on numerous occasions in the House, where were they when it mattered? Did its MPs go to the House of Commons, exercise their vote and vote against it? No. Sinn Féin prefers the art of drama in this Chamber. There are many people across our society who can see through that.

Sometimes, I feel in this House that we are back in 2016 debating the referendum itself. I have no doubt that that is the motive and intention of many on the Benches opposite, who still have not come to terms with the fact that the UK voted to leave the European Union. Instead, they attempt to use this House as a platform to reiterate old lines, with Sinn Féin in particular seeking to use the Assembly as a talking shop on Brexit, despite, in the four years since the referendum, not uttering a single word, casting a single vote or tabling a single amendment where it mattered: the House of Commons. If Dr Archibald —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: Absolutely. I have no problem at all giving way on this point.

Mr O'Dowd: I am slightly confused by the Member's position and Mr Girvan's position. Mr Girvan is a devolutionist, but, from listening to the Member, it appears that he is not a devolutionist.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am pretty sure that Mr Girvan sits in the House of Commons. I am right behind Mr Givan on the point that he made, however. I am wholeheartedly behind him. This party is a devolutionist party. We believe in Northern Ireland. Anybody who believes in Northern Ireland and its economic welfare and integrity would understand that the protocol is bad for Northern Ireland. We voted against it and tabled amendments to it in the House of Commons. Sinn Féin did not show up.

We must see today's motion and those from previous weeks for what they are. Today's is a classic example of stunt politics from the party opposite, while other crucial issues remain parked, such as, as has been stated, the restoration and state of readiness of our health service as it faces its most challenging winter to date. There are other issues, such as organ donation and the COVID response: I could go on. Regrettably, this is classic Brit-bashing from the parties opposite, which have absolutely no desire to see a prosperous Northern Ireland in a post-Brexit world. Instead, they want to fight on narrow party political points.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way. I did not comment on the amendment, although the Member may want to. The reason that we oppose it is that it gives tacit acceptance to the protocol, and I do not recall the Alliance Party ever campaigning for a light touch on North/South trade. North/South trade had to be unfettered, but it was OK to have barriers to east-west trade.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for his intervention. This point is always driven home to me: anybody who calls for borders North/South is seen as acting in direct violation of the Belfast Agreement, yet any unionists who stand up and say that they want the opportunity to have no barriers east-west are seen to be acting in direct violation of the Belfast Agreement. This party calls for unfettered access

to the internal market of the United Kingdom, which is our largest market.

Let us examine some of the EU's actions and its failure to honour its own international commitments, as set out in the withdrawal agreement. I see that my time is nearly up.

The problem is that the EU has never accepted those aims. It has never fully understood the agreement. It has never recognised the sovereignty of internal UK trade, and it does not accept that east-west relations are just as key as North/South relations.

Mr McAleer: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion this evening on the importance of the implementation of the protocol. As the Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs, I will focus my remarks mostly on agri-food and the wider agri-food sector.

In the North, our food and drink industry employs 100,000 people, and we feed 10 million people. It accounts for nearly 30% of total private-sector employment here in the North. The imposition of Brexit has caused mayhem and uncertainty in the sector. A lot of evidence that we have gathered from various stakeholders at the Committee and other places is testimony to that. For food and drink production, we need access North/South and east-west. Frictionless trade is absolutely crucial in every direction, but Brexit threatens that. Even though Members opposite do not support the protocol, the only way that we can get frictionless access to the British market is through the full implementation of the protocol. Therefore, we support the amendment.

Market access to food production is one side of the coin. The other side of the coin is the need for all-island processing lines. For example, here in the North, we export 800 million litres of milk every year to the South of Ireland. We import 350,000 pigs from the South. We export 400,000 lambs to the South, and we have imported over 40,000 cattle so far this year. If we did not have processing capacity in the South of Ireland, those 800 million litres of milk — and many of you rural Members represent those farmers — would end up in their tanks or in their sheughs, because there would be nowhere for it to go. We do not have the dairy processing capacity here in the North. We need the all-island trade.

One particular case study is Lakeland Dairies. It is one example of a big processor here in the North that has been briefing some of our MPs, and, indeed, I spoke to my colleague Órfhlaith Begley, who is one of the MPs who was briefed. That particular company processes 1.85 billion litres of milk here on the island of Ireland. That is from 3,200 farms: 1,950 in the South and 1,250 in the North. That is processed into thousands of tons of dairy products. Some 88,000 tons are exported across the water to Britain. The point that I am making is that they have four processing locations in the North: Artigarvan in my constituency, Ballyrashane in Derry, Banbridge, and the global logistics centre, which is not too far from here in Newtownards. They export to 80 countries throughout the world: a third to the UK, a third to the EU and a third to the rest of the world. The point is that it is absolutely impossible to segregate milk. Milk from cows in the North and milk from cows in the South cannot be segregated, so we need the protocol here to enable that all-island

processing capacity, because that is how our dairy product is —

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: Can you make it very quick, please?

Mr Givan: The Member will be given another minute, and I thank him for giving way. The Member makes a very strong argument for North/South unfettered access, and I do not disagree with any of that, but the Internal Market Bill goes some way to try to enhance the ability for that unfettered access east-west. Does he not recognise the importance of the east-west market?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McAleer: The east-west trade for agri-food is worth £4 billion. It is absolutely crucial. Some £1.5 billion is beef, dairy and sheep meat. There is a £2 billion North/South trade, but the processing lines are on this island, and if we do not have the protocol here to protect those processing lines, we will not have a product to export to Britain. The dairy farmers that Members all represent in rural areas will have to dump their milk, as the milk lorries will stop coming up the lane. Sausages, bacon and pork products here are from pigs right across the island, and the meat products are from cattle right across the island. There is this idea that Britain is the biggest market, but we need to remember that it is two sides of the same coin. There is the EU market, the British market and the rest of the world, but we need the island of Ireland for processing purposes. That is so crucial.

There are a couple of red flags — my time is running out — in respect of that access.

Recently, a programme assurance review was carried out. It listed that as red with regard to Brexit preparation, which means that there is urgent need for intervention to enable our ports to get things ready for east-west trade. Every day, 200 lorries come here from across the water so that our shelves can be stocked with stuff that might have a maximum six-day shelf life. If there is any delay to that, it will cause mayhem here.

There are problems with IT systems. Last week, the Committee heard from the port bosses that the HMRC goods vehicle movement service (GVMS) will not be ready in time for businesses to pre-register. The VAT system will not be in place until November. As regards unfettered access, last week, a letter came, I think, from the NIO. It made some movement towards looking at which goods might qualify. However, we do not know precisely how to segregate qualifying goods from non-qualifying goods or what measures will be in place to stop the North of Ireland becoming a back door into the British market. Labelling is another huge issue.

I will conclude quickly. The best way to protect the agri-food industry and all elements of the eating ecosystem is full implementation of the protocol. Friction equals cost. As Minister Poots said earlier, checks have been taking place here since the 19th century. The narrative that additional food standards checks at ports create some sort of border down the Irish Sea that impacts on the constitutional position of the North is completely wrong and misleading.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle as an seans labhairt anseo. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak. It would be remiss of me not to

lay down where the SDLP is coming from on the issue. A key core of the SDLP's philosophy is that we are, centrally, Europeans. The key element of being part of the European project was to ensure the breaking down of barriers in the transmission of goods and people and, indeed, breaking down fear factors that exist around nationalities and cultures, bringing people together to work in the common interest.

Members should be aware that, as a result of the EU, we drew down millions of pounds in structural funds and millions of pounds of Peace money to underpin the peace process. That was all there as a result of the good efforts and the links that were built, principally, by John Hume — God rest him — with other MEPs, the Reverend Paisley and John Taylor, with the likes of Jacques Delors, who felt profoundly about this place and the contribution that the EU could make to breaking down those barriers and underpinning peace in this part of Ireland. That is the essential, key element of where I am coming from.

I thank the Chairman, who outlined some of the issues that we heard at the Agriculture Committee, and the difficulties that people face. Most of those difficulties relate to the unanswered questions — questions that cannot be answered. Some of those refer to issues around VAT; the role and interpretation of export health certificates; whether GB suppliers into Northern Ireland will have to become European exporters and how that may affect matters; the specific problems with regard to flour and red meat; and many facets of labelling. Last week, I met the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU). The key element of the labelling and marketing of red meat as "Irish meat" is integral to the success of the meat production industry in Northern Ireland. Those are just some of the key elements.

We have also heard from the ports, as the Chair mentioned, about the difficulties that they face, even with the good cooperation of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. They are likely to face problems with HMRC. The Chair referred to the difficulty with the computerised system, which may well not be operational until July. As we know, we are supposed to run out of road by 31 December. Those are some of the problems.

The good Member over here referred to the big business of the EU and said that it was remote from ordinary people. Maybe the DUP was taken for a wee bit of a ride by people like Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg — men of the people; there is no doubt about that. Essentially, we knew that the withdrawal agreement was coming.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I will be as brief as I can. As a unionist Remain voter, I remain turned off by the rhetoric of many American, EU and Irish politicians who do not understand the Good Friday Agreement and who detract from what is happening and what the Assembly is trying to do. Whilst, I do agree that Boris Johnson and his ilk have been ill-informed about the people of Northern Ireland, similarly, politicians across the world have been ill-informed about the uniqueness of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

7.30 pm

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member very much for his contribution. We may agree to disagree on that point.

Brussels was never going to let Britain's Internal Market Bill go uncontested. Why would they when the Internal Market Bill gave Ministers the powers to breach aspects of the Northern Ireland protocol on state aid and customs? The Commission is not raising a breach of the protocol in article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, however, because the powers given to UK Ministers under the Internal Market Bill have yet to be used. Instead, the Commission's issue is a general breach of article 5 on the duty of good faith. Article 5 states that the EU and the UK must take:

"all appropriate measures, whether general or particular, to ensure fulfilment of the obligations arising from this Agreement and shall refrain from any measures which could jeopardise the attainment of the objectives of this Agreement."

The Commission made it very clear, the day after the Internal Market Bill was published, that the UK had violated the good faith obligation since:

"the draft Bill jeopardises the attainment of the objectives of the Agreement."

The Commission went on:

"The EU does not accept the argument that the aim of the draft Bill is to protect the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement. In fact, it is of the view that it does the opposite."

The Commission explicitly said that if the Internal Market Bill were adopted it will:

"constitute an extremely serious violation of the Withdrawal Agreement and of international law."

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McGlone: OK. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: You have to lead by example.

Mr McGlone: I was just getting started.

Mr Speaker: We must lead by example.

Mr Blair: Like my party colleague Stewart Dickson, I rise to express my deep concerns about recent developments relating to the UK Government's Internal Market Bill proposals that threatened to break international law. That will not surprise any Members. I urge the Assembly to support the motion and the amendment. I urge the UK Government to reconsider their proposals and to engage with the EU constructively on these very serious issues.

I speak with the assumption that evolving processes with different and very serious potential outcomes can, and should, be the subject of debate in any democracy. Democracy does not stop with the outcome of one ballot. So, whether it was the decision taken after a debate last week, the week before or a ballot taken four years ago, it is crucial that we continue to debate and discuss these very serious outcomes and the issues arising for our constituents and vital sectors in this place.

From this point on, like Declan McAleer, the Committee Chair, and Patsy McGlone, I will concentrate on matters relating to my membership of the EARA Committee. In doing so, I know that any border across the island or down the Irish Sea has emotional and political implications.

However, in pragmatic terms, while east-west trade is greater in value than North/South, there are many more movements across this island than across the Irish Sea. There are also 270 North/South border crossing points to manage as compared to seven along the Irish Sea.

We should also point out that concern extends beyond this island. At a meeting, just a week ago, the House of Lords EU Environment Sub-Committee raised its concerns about any renegeing on the terms of the protocol that could see the customs frontier being pushed back onto the island, bringing the pressures of checks, as the UK naturally seeks to protect its own economic integrity. In the context of an increased level of checks and controls being required for goods moving from the rest of the UK to Northern Ireland in the absence of a UK/EU agreement, I, along with my colleagues, urge the UK Government to consider the likely impact that that would have on Northern Ireland businesses and consumers if the future relationship negotiations are unsuccessful.

As a member of the EARA Committee, it is important for me to stress the significance of the agriculture sector to our regional economy. It represents around 10% of all activity, and that is considerably higher than the overall average for the sector in the rest of the UK. It is essential that the protocol be implemented in a way that minimises friction on the flow of agri-food trade and that works for businesses and citizens in Northern Ireland.

The impact of any potential delays, here or in GB, on the value of perishable goods and animal welfare are matters of critical concern and consideration. The prospect of resolving issues such as the common veterinary area are not enhanced by threats to break the terms of international agreements. That is a reality. Given that Northern Ireland will remain aligned to large aspects of EU regulation, the all-island context of matters such as food safety and environmental considerations should be self-evident.

Questions also remain about the trading from Northern Ireland to Ireland of products that incorporate components from the rest of the UK. In that context, in the absence of a UK-EU free trade agreement, there will be a serious impact from the application of tariffs. Those concerns have been raised by producers here and by suppliers in GB, who are concerned about the future of those arrangements.

Guided by my belief in open and liberal international trade and, more importantly, by many expert voices from our vital sectors, I support and urge support for the motion and the amendment.

Mr Speaker: I call Sinead McLaughlin and advise her that she has two minutes.

Ms McLaughlin: I rise in support of the motion as amended. Abiding by the withdrawal agreement is essential for the citizens of Northern Ireland and for community relations, our workers, our businesses and our economy. The British Government are not treating Northern Ireland seriously enough. It seems that Ministers do not understand our history or economy. Perhaps they do not fully understand why the Good Friday Agreement was crafted, or why it was crafted so painstakingly and with such care. For some in government, Northern Ireland is a negotiating opportunity, not a place of almost two million people who overwhelmingly want to live happily

with each other and with both sets of neighbours — those to the east and those to the south.

It is time for our First Minister and deputy First Minister to come clean and come together. They both hate the current Government's position, so it is time for them to say so. In fact, there is probably not a person in the Chamber who is happy with the British Government's position. By ignoring their commitments, the British Government are increasing tensions between communities here and in the House, and are increasing the risks of a disastrous Brexit outcome for our economy, businesses and workers.

I can remember when commentators talked about Northern Ireland potentially having the best of both worlds as a result of Brexit. Those commentators said that businesses in Northern Ireland would continue to have access to the UK markets while having open access to the EU, particularly to the markets of the Republic. No one is talking about the best of both worlds now. It is more likely that people are talking about the worst of everything.

Let us recall why Northern Ireland requires open access to the EU single market, especially to the Republic. I often listen to members of the DUP on the radio and television, and here. They make it sound as if Britain is the only jurisdiction that is important to traders in the North. That is a long way from being true. I will give you some statistics from the House of Commons Library. I will start with Scotland.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close, please?

Ms McLaughlin: OK. Sixty per cent of Scotland's external sales go to the rest of the UK and, in Wales, it is 61%. Some 48.6% of Northern Ireland's external sales go to the rest of the UK.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close, please?

Ms McLaughlin: I rest my case. We in Northern Ireland require access to both markets.

Mr Speaker: I call Andrew Muir to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. You have five minutes.

Mr Muir: This is the first time that I have made a winding-up speech on an amendment or debate, so I ask Members to show forbearance to me as a new Member. I hope that I am given the same latitude as Gerry Carroll was given, albeit we do not have the same politics [*Laughter.*]

Mr Speaker: You have five minutes. That is all you need to worry about.

Mr Muir: The amendment was tabled by the Alliance Party in a spirit of trying to reach a common position on the matter, but I respect the views that have been expressed. The protocol is a reality in Northern Ireland. I can understand Members' frustration in today's debate and in previous debates. It is a frustration that I feel. It is a frustration as a result of Brexit; it is something that we have been feeling for the past number of years, and, unfortunately, it is a frustration that, I fear, we will feel for many years to come.

I will pick up some points from the debate. Caoimhe Archibald opened the debate and rightly stated that the withdrawal agreement and the protocol must be upheld. They are legal obligations, and we live with the reality

of that. We have to, as the amendment states, look to find a way to ensure that they can most practicably be implemented.

Proposing the amendment, Stewart Dickson stated clearly that the power to implement light-touch arrangements lies with both the UK and the European Union. The amendment is crafted in such a manner to reflect that both parties have the power to ensure such arrangements.

The protocol is a compromise. We live with compromise: the Assembly is a compromise, as are the politics that we operate within. As a result, they are not perfect, but compromises have to be reached to ensure that we can implement Brexit, which is difficult in the first place.

I mentioned the frustration of Members, and Christopher Stalford talked about his frustration at the number of motions on this subject that have come to the Chamber. I understand that, and I, too, feel the frustration around Brexit. I felt that frustration as Patsy McGlone outlined his position as that of a proud European. I felt that frustration on the day that the referendum result was announced. I continue to feel it, and I wish that we were still a member of the European Union. I understand that we have left, and we have to ensure that implementation of the withdrawal is done in a way that does not harm businesses and workers across Northern Ireland or diminish the rights of citizens.

Matthew O'Toole outlined the legal obligations that arise from that. These obligations are to be subject to litigation by the European Union because of the Bill introduced by the UK Government. The introduction of such a Bill should not be taken lightly.

Roy Beggs outlined his opposition to the protocol. I find that continued opposition frustrating. I understand where it comes from but have yet to hear from the Ulster Unionist Party what its alternative is. We are here, and the protocol is a reality. It was the outcome of the general election at the end of last year. I have yet to hear what the alternatives to it are. We have to implement the protocol in such a way that the UK and EU can ensure as light-touch arrangements as possible.

Paul Givan touched on an issue that was discussed in the last debate: how unionists have been let down on numerous occasions by the UK Government. As someone who has been a bit of a political nerd in my lifetime, I have seen that. Why, then, did the DUP put its trust in Theresa May for so many years, knowing that, over time, it is always betrayed by the UK Government? However, it did, and we live with the consequences of the inability to agree the withdrawal agreement put forward by Theresa May. As a result, the protocol is now in place.

Emma Sheerin talked about "Brexit fatigue" and "COVID fatigue". Everyone is tired, but we must be steadfast in our support of the protocol as we take the next steps.

Declan McAleer talked about the importance of agri-food, and Paul Givan made an intervention on the importance of east-west trade. East-west and North/South, trade is important. Leaving the EU was never going to be frictionless. There were always going to be challenges, and the protocol is, unfortunately, the best way to deal with them.

Sinead McLaughlin, the last Member to speak, was limited to two minutes. She talked about how the withdrawal agreement is essential for businesses. What businesses

need now is clarity on what the future trading relationship will be; they do not need the negotiations to go right to the wire. Businesses and workers are dealing with the impact of COVID-19, which has been devastating for people across Northern Ireland. What we need from these negotiations is a successful conclusion and the clarity that comes with that. We do not need a skeleton agreement that does not give the required clarity. We need to come together, and the EU and the UK need to agree on what we have set out in the amendment: light-touch arrangements.

Mr Speaker: I call John O'Dowd to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr O'Dowd: Understandably, Members have asked why we are debating this again, but it is probably the most fundamental constitutional change in the history of Ireland since partition 100 years ago. That does not necessarily apply to the current negotiations on the free trade agreement. These negotiations, because the British Government acted in bad faith and intend to break international law, now involve the protocol. I note that Mr Givan said that he supports the content of the Bill, which, as has been stated, will break international law. I do not think that it is surprising that the Assembly, the local democratic institution and the institution of the Good Friday Agreement, is debating such an important matter on several occasions, given that it is of such significance for our present and our future.

7.45 pm

We are all very familiar with how negotiations work in this part of the world. The negotiations are now heading towards a crucial stage. Either there will be an agreement or there will not. Often, when negotiations are taking place, locally, people ask me, "Well, John, what's happening? What are they talking about?", and I say, "Well, there's one thing we can be sure of: they're not talking about the weather. They're in there going through it line by line and are deciding our futures".

Mr Stalford has a particular style when making his contributions, which I often enjoy, but I think that he was a bit over the top this evening. He said that the EU is undemocratic and that unelected people are deciding our future. I was scanning the internet as some Members spoke to try to find out where Lord Frost got his mandate, but I cannot find that information. Lord Frost was appointed by Boris Johnson. He was picked out of the retired realms of the Civil Service and brought in to negotiate our future. That is undemocratic. There is nobody there of a democratic nature protecting us. That is why it is so important that we, as elected representatives, debate, discuss and, yes, vote on these things.

Some from the unionist Benches have complained that we are doing this as a bit of Brit-bashing. It is not the intention to Brit-bash. I suspect that there are — I use this term advisedly — Brits in the Chamber who voted to remain in the European Union and who are opposed to Brexit. There are certainly millions of them across the water who are opposed to Brexit and opposed to what is happening at this stage. There are many, many people in our broader constituencies who have serious concerns about losing their European identity and about being pulled out of the European Union against their will. So it is not about Brit-bashing; it is about defending our rights as the collective of

citizens that makes up this part of the island and, indeed, the island of Ireland.

It is complicated because of the relationships North/South and east-west. I do not want a border up the Irish Sea. I do not want one. I do not think that it would be good for relationships or for business, and I do not think that it would have any benefit for people on either of these islands. However, as I said in the last debate, we did not bring that border into reality.

I think that Mr McAleer made a good point. The Members opposite raised this imagery of a border down the Irish Sea, with controls and gunboats going up and down it and all those sorts of things, but, as Mr McAleer said, there have been checks in the Irish Sea for over 100 years, if not longer. Was it, as I suspect, a negotiating position that has backfired on some on the Benches opposite, given that they have presented the protocol as being much more than it actually is?

The protocol is, again, another compromise. In June 2016, many Members on this side of the House voted to remain in the European Union. We then moved forward to the Brexit vote on whether to stay in the customs union and the single market. In January 2017, the Executive — they were either up or down at that stage; they were in difficulties — still had a negotiating group going to meet the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the British Government on the future direction of Brexit. Theresa May stood up on the Tuesday and announced that we were leaving the customs union and the single market, and we were all due to meet her on the Thursday. That was another rug pulled from underneath us. I think that Mr Dickson referred to the soft approach. In the past, the term “soft Brexit” was used. There could have been a soft Brexit at that stage, had we stayed in the single market and the customs union, and that would have solved the problem, by the way, of borders in any direction. That would have solved the problem, but it was pulled from underneath us.

On European representation, which, again, Mr Givan mentioned, there should be MEPs elected from here, and there still could be MEPs elected from here, but the Dublin Government buckled on that — they buckled on it. There could have been representation from here, only the Dublin Government, which said that the North would never be left behind again —

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr O’Dowd: In one moment.

— left us behind again. Go ahead.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. He speaks well on the topic, and, as someone who also voted Remain, I think that it would be great to have those voices representing Remainers. He made a good point about the Irish Government. Would it not have been good for Sinn Féin to use the seats that it has at Westminster to make that very point?

Mr O’Dowd: Sinn Féin has a clearly stated position on Westminster: we do not attend. We are active abstentionists in that sense. Has Westminster changed anything in relation to Brexit in a positive manner? No. It has not served the purposes of the people whom we represent in any way, but that is a debate for another day.

The soft Brexit option was taken away from us, as was the European representation option. When I say “us”, I mean those who wish to see a closer relationship with the European Union. That option was taken away. The protocol was brought forward, and we accepted it. We said, “That is where we are with these negotiations. We need to move on. We need to create stability for our economy, for our businesses and for our society”. Even when the Assembly came back, we were in a fragile state, and we needed to create stability in politics here because Brexit was the backdrop to the problems that we had in the past.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr O’Dowd: Just give me a second. We all made decisions, and then, lo and behold, the protocol was taken away as well. Where is the compromise? Where is the facilitation? Where is the outreach from the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party towards those who wish to remain in the European Union? Go ahead.

Mr McNulty: When the Member refers to the people whom Sinn Féin MPs represent by not going to Westminster, is he also referring to the people whom Sinn Féin MPs represent in court?

Mr O’Dowd: I am sorry; I missed the last bit.

Mr McNulty: Is he also referring to the people whom Sinn Féin MPs represent in court?

Mr O’Dowd: I am not sure what the Member is referring to — oh, I do know, yes. I suspect that, if the Member looks back through history, he will find that one of his own representatives worked as a barrister and continued to do so for a time. There was another one who was a doctor and continued to do that work. I ask the Member to check through his notes before he comes up with that sort of stuff.

I want to move on to where we go next. The DUP tells us that it will vote against the amendment tonight. I am uncomfortable with the amendment, but it is a compromise. The amendment is a stretch for us, as well, because it:

“calls on the UK Government and the European Union to work constructively within the context of the protocol ... to put in place any waivers, mitigations and flexibilities necessary to make its implementation as light touch as possible.”

I have no difficulty with “light touch”, but, a week out from the end of a negotiation, it is not always best to say, “Look, we are prepared to do something”. However, I accept the Alliance Party’s position and what it is trying to do. It is trying to unite the House on a position. The DUP has spent the last hour or so telling us that we have to reach out and find common ground and that we have to accommodate each other. Well, then, why are they voting against the amendment? The amendment is another compromise from this side of the House, but the DUP will vote against it because, unfortunately, the DUP Members are Brexiteers — red, white and blue Brexiteers. They are not serving the interests of anyone by doing that. They cannot achieve their objective without harming our economy, our political relationships, business or farming — all those other things that are, no doubt, precious to them.

Here is what the DUP will have to do. If you are serious about finding common ground and serious about working

together, you will have to work with us. You cannot have it all your own way. It is all right for your MPs at Westminster who go for coffees or whatever they do with the European Research Group. You have to work with us and with the Benches over there. If you are serious about working with us on the issue, let us see how serious you are. The amendment is there for you to vote for.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up. That was good timing.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that they should continue to uphold social distancing in the Chamber and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come to the Chamber.

Question, That the amendment be made, put a second time and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

8.00 pm

Question put a second time.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Speaker: Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly currently has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I also remind Members that social distancing should continue to be observed while the Division is taking place. Please be patient at all times and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 45; Noes 33.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McAleer and Ms Sheerin.

NOES

Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, 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 Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buckley and Mr Givan.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon [Teller, Ayes], Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins [Teller, Ayes], 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, Mr McNulty.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the British Government's stated intention, in breach of international law, to renege on elements of the EU/UK withdrawal agreement; urges the European Council to stand by, fully, the EU/UK withdrawal agreement as agreed; and calls on the European Council to require the British Government to implement fully the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and further calls on the UK Government and the European Union to work constructively within the context of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to put in place any waivers, mitigations and flexibilities necessary to make its implementation as light touch as possible.

Adjourned at 8.13 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 13 October 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: This motion is necessary to allow business to continue at 2.00 pm in the absence of questions to the Minister for Communities. Before I call the Clerk to read the motion, I want to put on record that I am disappointed that no other Executive Minister was able to stand in for the Minister for Communities to respond to questions on her behalf.

This is a situation without precedent, and, as I explained in my letter last evening, I want to ensure that Members still have the ability to have their questions answered. I am therefore ruling that Members who were successful in the ballot and submitted a question to the Minister for Communities to be answered at today's Question Time may submit a question to the Minister to be answered at her next scheduled Question Time on 3 November. Those Members will be entitled to receive a written answer to their question submitted for today unless they wish to resubmit that question for Question Time on 3 November. Members who were successful in the ballot to ask a topical question for answer by the Minister for Communities today may ask a topical question to the Minister at Question Time on 3 November, and the ballot order for listed and topical questions to the Minister for Communities will remain the same for Question Time on 3 November as it was for today.

I also want to put on record that this should not be seen as a precedent to be repeated in the future. If this situation arises again, the proper response, as always, will be for another Minister to agree to stand in.

Ms Armstrong: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 13 October 2020.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 13 October 2020.

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

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

Official Opposition: Referral to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly refers to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, under Standing Order 59(3)(b), the matter of the commissioning of an independent review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the statement of entitlements for an official Opposition, as set out in paragraph 3.7 of annex C of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) deal; agrees that the terms of reference for this review should be agreed jointly by this Committee and the Assembly Commission; and further agrees that the Committee should report on the outcome of this review to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have up to five minutes to propose and another five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs D Kelly: The motion that the Assembly Commission brings before the House today is for a very specific and technical purpose. I propose to briefly outline the background for Members. Section 3.7 of the New Decade, New Approach deal contained a number of commitments related to funding for an official Opposition in the Assembly, including that additional funding should be made available to parties that form the Opposition and that the Assembly Commission should seek additional resources if further funding was deemed to be appropriate. However, that was in the context of a review being carried out by an independent person into the adequacy and effectiveness of the statement of entitlements for an official Opposition, which was set out in the Fresh Start Agreement.

On 19 February 2020, the Assembly Commission agreed that the review of funding to be made available to parties that form the Opposition is a matter for consideration by the Assembly Commission but that the review of the statement of entitlements for an official Opposition was a matter for consideration by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC). The Assembly Commission agreed that officials should engage with the AERC to jointly develop terms of reference for an independent review of funding to be made available to parties and the statement of entitlements for an official Opposition, as set out in the Fresh Start Agreement.

I understand that the AERC met on 24 June 2020 to consider that approach from the Assembly Commission and agreed that a formal referral from the Assembly under Standing Order 59(3)(b) would be appropriate on the matter. Consequently, the Assembly Commission agreed to bring today's motion to the House. Therefore, today's debate is purely intended to ensure that the AERC can take forward that NDNA commitment. Once the AERC reports to the Assembly with the conclusions of the independent review, the Assembly will have a fuller debate about the arrangements and provisions that should be in place for any official Opposition. If, at that point, the Assembly supports the outcome of the review, the Assembly Commission will be in a formal position to determine and provide the funding and resources required to implement its recommendations. That is likely to include bringing forward a revised financial assistance to political parties scheme to the Assembly.

I hope that that provides an explanation to Members of what is proposed today. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr McHugh (The Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee): I welcome the opportunity to speak as the Deputy Chair of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and to briefly outline the Committee's consideration of the issue to date. I will start by reminding the House of the remit of the Committee and how it relates to the subject matter of the motion.

In particular, under Standing Order 59(3)(b), the AERC has the power to consider:

"matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly or the Executive Committee as may be referred to it by the Assembly."

When the Committee last met on 24 June 2020, it received advice on the procedural options for undertaking new pieces of work, and it was noted that the referral mechanism in Standing Order 59(3)(b) is an appropriate route in that regard. Also at its meeting of 24 June, the AERC considered correspondence from the Assembly Commission, which proposed that the bodies should work jointly to facilitate the implementation of the recommendation in New Decade, New Approach regarding a review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the statement of entitlements for an official Opposition, as set out in the Fresh Start Agreement. The Committee agreed in principle to undertake that work jointly with the Commission, subject to the necessary procedural arrangements being followed.

The motion from the Commission will give the AERC the ability to ensure that the review outlined in NDNA is taken forward. In that regard, paragraph 3.7 of annex C of NDNA refers to the "relevant Assembly authorities" commissioning the review. The AERC remit on the functioning of the Assembly and its experience in progressing relevant topics in previous mandates, including the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act 2016, mean that the Committee is well placed to assist in facilitating the review. Therefore, given that the respective functions of the Committee and the Commission are relevant to the work in question, it is appropriate that the work should be taken forward jointly.

I note that NDNA also states:

"An appropriate independent person should be appointed to conduct such a review, and the review should have regard to relevant comparators."

Therefore, in addition to jointly agreeing the terms of reference for the review, the Committee and the Commission will also need to consider the approach to identifying and appointing an appropriate independent person as envisaged in the NDNA recommendations.

In conclusion, subject to the motion being agreed by the House, I look forward to the Committee commencing its work. The outcome of the review will, of course, be debated at a later date when the AERC reports back to the Assembly.

Mr Allister: In pre-COVID days, Members were invited — I was certainly invited and was always happy to take up invitations — to visit schools and to speak to politics societies etc. Very often at such events, I would ask the pupils to name me three things that denote a democracy in the Western world. Invariably, you would get an answer about universal suffrage — of course — but you would also almost invariably get an answer about the existence of an opposition. Of course, that is a correct answer, because no self-respecting democracy or legislature can hope to operate successfully or credibly without an opposition. Yet, for all but six or eight months of the 22 years of the existence of this Assembly, we have had the farce of having no opposition. That, of course, fits entirely with the ethos of the House, which flows from the absurdity of mandatory coalition in which there is no thought, respect or regard to even the possibility of opposition.

One of the functions of an opposition is not just to challenge, scrutinise and oppose but to present an alternative at future elections.

Of course, the pernicious absurdity of mandatory coalition is that that alternative can never be presented. For as long as you have a system that says that any party that retains a handful of MLAs will automatically and as of right be in government, you cannot afford an alternative at an election. Therefore, the practical, forward-looking function of an Opposition is fundamentally undermined.

10.45 am

It sits uneasily with the structures of the House to even contemplate an Opposition. Of course, its tardiness in doing so is illustrated by the fact that 'New Decade, New Approach' said that the very report that we are to commission today should have been with the House in July. Such is the indifference of the House to the very concept of opposition that, even if it is belated and hamstrung by the fact that it will not be opposition in its full form, there will doubtless be many in the House who will want to tie it even further. There are parties in the House that fear opposition and were scared and uneasy that, on the return of Stormont, the SDLP or the Ulster Unionists, for example, might have had the courage to be the Opposition, because they like the cosy cabal whereby they are all in government with no one holding them to account.

I do not know whether we will ever end up with the proper functions of an Opposition, but I have severe doubts about it, given the mindset of the House. However, certainly, as a member of AERC, I look forward to the investigation of the matter and look forward to attempting to ensure that, after

all these years, the House will finally have the opportunity to have an Opposition with teeth, not some timid ticking of a box. Of course, the wherewithal has to be supplied as well as the political will, and that might be the biggest hurdle.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call John Blair to conclude the debate and wind on the motion.

Mr Blair: I thank Members for their contributions. As my Commission colleague Dolores Kelly said, the purpose of the motion is very specific. The Assembly Commission seeks the agreement of the Assembly to refer to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee the matter of a review of the arrangements provided for an Opposition as set out in the New Decade, New Approach deal. Therefore, there is little, at this stage, that I need to add.

I will take a moment to reflect on the comments made by a couple of Members. I appreciate that Maolíosa McHugh, in his role as AERC Chair, outlined the role of the Committee, the detail of the review and the working arrangements that will be put in place with the Committee as we move forward.

On the points raised by Jim Allister, the issues with regard to the role of an Opposition are a matter for that review, and they will be brought back to the House at an appropriate stage. I am sure that Mr Allister and other Members will understand that this matter, like other items in NDNA and as the Assembly Commission accepts, has been subject to delay in the midst of other priorities during the public health crisis. I am sure that Mr Allister will understand that the more political matters that he raised are not for consideration by the Commission.

The Assembly Commission acknowledges that progress on this, as with other items in NDNA, has been delayed. However, should the motion pass today, it will enable the Assembly Commission and AERC to agree terms of reference to ensure that an independent review will be conducted. A further debate will be held in the Chamber once the review is complete. If the recommendations are approved by the House, the Assembly Commission will, in the context of the Assembly's decision, be able to progress other elements of the commitment in NDNA, particularly on issues related to delivering funding for an Opposition. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly refers to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, under Standing Order 59(3)(b), the matter of the commissioning of an independent review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the statement of entitlements for an official Opposition, as set out in paragraph 3.7 of annex C of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) deal; agrees that the terms of reference for this review should be agreed jointly by this Committee and the Assembly Commission; and further agrees that the Committee should report on the outcome of this review to the Assembly.

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

Committee Business

Standing Order 45A

Ms Dillon (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move

Leave out Standing Order 45A and insert

“(1) Subject to paragraph (3), where, at a time when all Northern Ireland Ministers ceased to hold office, a party is entitled to nominate a person to hold ministerial office under section 18(2) to (6) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and declines to do so, that party may choose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition.

(2) Subject to paragraph (3), where, during the relevant period, a party is entitled to nominate a person to hold a ministerial office under section 18(10) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and declines to do so, that party may choose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition.

(3) A party is not to be recognised as part of the official Opposition if any member of that party holds a ministerial office.

(4) Where only one party chooses to be recognised in accordance with paragraph (1) or paragraph (2) that party is to be regarded as the official Opposition.

(5) In this order ‘relevant period’ means the period of 2 years beginning with the date on which the ministerial offices are filled under 16A(3)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, Members. The Business Committee has agreed that 45 minutes should be allocated for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have five minutes to propose the motion and a further five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Ms Dillon: On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring the motion to the House today, proposing the amending of Standing Order 45A. Currently, Standing Order 45A provides:

“where a party is entitled to nominate a person to hold Ministerial office under section 18(2) to (6) of the NI Act 1998; and declines to do so, that party may choose to be recognised as part of the official opposition.”

It also states:

“A party is not to be recognised as part of the official opposition if any member of that party holds a Ministerial office, or held a Ministerial office and ceased to hold that office otherwise than at a time when all ... Ministers ceased to hold office.”

It further states:

“Where only one party chooses to be recognised in accordance with paragraph (1) that party is to be regarded as the official opposition.”

The Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act 2016 made provision for the formation and arrangements of an official Opposition. However, the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement contemplates an amendment to that Act to provide that:

“a party can enter the Official Opposition under the Act up to two years following the formation of the Executive.”

Although official opposition was not chosen by the Committee as an immediate priority in its strategic planning, paragraph 3.6 in annex C of NDNA states that an amendment to Standing Orders:

“should be made to give effect to this within 3 months of the Assembly being reformed.”

At its meeting on 29 January 2020, the Committee agreed to seek legal advice relating to official opposition arising from the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act. On 11 March 2020, the Committee received legal advice on the provisions in the Opposition Act, Standing Orders and the NI Act 1998 on the issue. The advice also explained the legal position should the Assembly make any necessary changes to Standing Orders to give effect to paragraph 3.6 of the NDNA agreement. As the Assembly first sat on 11 January 2020, the Committee agreed at its meeting in March to amend Standing Order 45A and, therefore, to remain within the three-month deadline of NDNA to amend Standing Orders by 11 April 2020. However, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Committee was asked to urgently consider temporary provisions to Standing Orders at its meeting on 25 March 2020. Therefore, the Committee agreed to defer consideration of Standing Order 45A.

As a result of the pandemic and following guidance from the Chairpersons' Liaison Group (CLG), the Committee agreed not to meet unless considering business related to COVID-19. Therefore, the meeting on 17 September 2020 was the next opportunity for the Committee to consider the amendment. At that meeting, the Committee received further legal advice and gave consideration to amending Standing Order 45A. During discussions, some members queried the rationale behind the two-year period following the formation of the Executive when a party can enter official opposition. The Committee agreed to defer its consideration until its next meeting, and, subsequently, I wrote to the Executive Office and the NIO to ask what the rationale for the two-year period was. A response was received from the Minister of State. In that response, the Committee noted that the parties recognised that it was right to provide for a longer period to enter opposition following an election, because the current time frame is very restrictive. There is also the need to prevent parties entering opposition for purely electoral purposes as an Assembly election approaches.

Some views were expressed on the Committee that the rationale for the two-year period was not clarified enough, and I am sure that you will hear from the Member about why he expressed his opposition to the motion. Nevertheless, at its meeting on 30 September 2020, the Committee agreed that Standing Order 45A should be amended and agreed the motion on the Order Paper today.

I acknowledge that the Committee has not met the deadline of implementing the amendment within three months of the Assembly being formed. However, given the circumstances that we find ourselves in today, the Committee has endeavoured to prioritise the amendment in its work programme and to bring the motion to the House today.

Finally, we must remember that the NDNA is a product of a five-party, cross-party agreement that returned us to these institutions. It is in the Committee's gift to bring its proposals to the House and to implement measures in NDNA for which it has responsibility.

I note that the previous item of business today related to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and dealt with the topic of an Opposition, as set out in paragraph 3.7 of annex C of NDNA —.

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

Ms Dillon: No problem.

As for Mr Allister's comments, there is no cosy cabal, I can assure you. Every day, many Members of the House who have Ministers in government behave as though they are in opposition, and it is their right to do so and their right to challenge.

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

Ms S Bradley: I support the motion. As has been outlined — I will not repeat what was said — this derived from the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. There was, I suppose, healthy debate at the Procedures Committee about how it was arrived at, and, to be fair, it was from representatives who, perhaps, were not subject to that document. The House does well to be reminded that the NDNA document, like every other agreement, is full of compromise. Whether I think that this is the landing place that we, as a party, would have liked to be at this point, from a procedural, Committee point of view, is almost irrelevant. We were tasked with going forward and honouring what was in that agreement. I made the point at the Committee that it is critical that, while we, no doubt, as a House, should and will challenge the Governments who are behind the agreement, we should collectively come together at every opportunity that we have to say that we have honoured it and have played our part. This was very much in the gift of the Procedures Committee. Therefore, I am pleased that we have brought it to the House.

I accept that there was a delay. The dates were set and, I have no doubt, could have been achieved, but, obviously with COVID, we all need to find a bit of grace and space to say that things that we would have liked to be done in a timely fashion could not be. I take the opportunity again to thank the Committee Clerks, who very quickly put their efforts into other work, in that time, that has been to the betterment of the House.

Ms Armstrong: I support the motion. It is very clear that, for years, Alliance has said that an official Opposition should be in place. Like Mr Allister, we agree on the nonsense that we have with mandatory coalition. It forces together people who would not normally sit comfortably together.

In the winding-up speech, I would like clarification of the “relevant period” that is discussed in the Standing Order. Has the clock started ticking from January 2020? Does it apply in this mandate, or is it only for future mandates?

Mr Carroll: Obviously, as we have heard, opposition does not exist and has not for many years. As I raised at the Committee, there is limited time for parties that are not in the Executive to have their say, to have speaking time

and to scrutinise the Executive. The pandemic crisis that we are in has exposed the need for maximum scrutiny, transparency and opposition, where necessary. It seems to me from media reports in the last day, at least, that the Executive are in a dysfunctional stage.

Three weeks ago, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) apparently advised the British Government of the need to restrict workplaces, but they did not act. Yesterday, eventually, limited if not enough action was taken by the Tory Government. Today, we are still waiting on the Executive to make announcements. We are hearing that there may be announcements today, but there may not be. I am not on the Executive, so I do not know. That exposes the need for maximum scrutiny and maximum opposition, where necessary. We have one of the highest infection rates in the world, and it is deeply worrying that this amendment to Standing Orders will essentially restrict the role of a potential opposition even further. That point has to be emphasised.

11.00 am

As the Chair alluded to, I raised that point in Committee. I asked why the two-year limit was set, and we had correspondence from the Minister of State, Robin Walker, stating that the two-year limit should be in place to avoid parties using being in opposition purely for electoral purposes. Presumably, he thinks that parties should not be able to leave the Executive and join the Opposition beyond a two-year period because he has determined that that may be being done for electoral purposes. Surely that should not be his determination to make but that of this House. It should be the Committee and probably the Executive parties, to some extent, that determine that. It does not seem to be a sound argument. It seems to have been plucked from the air. It potentially limits the amount of time for democracy, accountability and scrutiny, and, for those reasons, I cannot give it my support.

It could also copper-fasten the rules of the big parties. If a current Executive party wanted to leave the Executive, it might do so because, internally, it has decided that that is the best mechanism for it and its constituents, but the time and resources that it could get as the official Opposition would be limited. If a period of two years and a month had passed, there would be pressure on parties not to pull out of the Executive because there would be limited opposition time and resources available to it. For those reasons and many more, I cannot support this change to Standing Orders.

Mr Allister: What a grudging, half-hearted endorsement, if you could even call it that, of opposition that you can have it but can access it only for two years. What a farce. If a situation arises in which, after two years, there is a bust-up on the Executive and a party, or parties, decides that it cannot stay in there any longer, all that it can do is join Gerry Carroll and me on these Benches, with no function, no powers and no opposition. What a fix by the parties that dominate government to shield themselves in the last years of the mandate from any effective opposition to make sure that they can neuter the voices that might oppose them by robbing them of any function of opposition. They are making sure that —.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: In a moment. They are making sure that, although parties could have had the full functions of opposition and all the backup of opposition if they had had the courage to go into opposition in the first two years, leaving it until after two years before an election means that all of that is taken away. What does that say about the Executive's bona fides and their commitment to even having an opposition if, at the end of that period, it is so disposable that it is simply binned?

Ms Dillon: Thank you very much to Mr Allister for taking my intervention. I do not believe that anybody in this House is neutered at any time. There is only one of you, and I have never known you to be neutered. No party, and certainly not the larger parties, will be neutered. I do support resources and time being given to an opposition. We were given the rationale behind the two years. It was in NDNA and was not our choice. I agree with what the MLA who spoke previously said about how it would much better if the matter had come through the House and undergone Committee scrutiny. Unfortunately, that is not the position that we are in.

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

Mr Allister: The Member cannot say that she does not agree and then come to the House and propose the very thing that she does not agree with. If she did not agree with the two-year limitation, she would vote against it instead of moving the motion. The thing is a farce. It is also an invitation to the two big parties to simply bide their time until the two years are up before they give way to their natural inclination to doormat the minor parties in government — to make sure that they make their position as ineffective as possible within government and, as I say, to doormat them. What can those parties then do? Nothing. They can come and sit here, but they do not have the functions or powers of opposition, and those who would doormat them and drive them out have the luxury of knowing that they can do all that without facing opposition. That is farcical and ridiculous. It demonstrates the lack of sincerity by the main parties in the House about even the very concept of opposition. The totalitarianism that runs through the veins of some of them is very evident in this approach.

Mr T Buchanan: I welcome the opportunity to conclude today's debate on the motion to amend the Standing Order. First, I would like to thank the Members who contributed and expressed concerns on this. As outlined, the amendment has come to the House today as the New Decade, New Approach agreement contemplates an amendment to the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 to provide that a party can enter the official Opposition under the Act up to two years following the formation of the Executive. We have heard concerns about the two years part of it in the Chamber today. The Chairperson began by setting out the time frame of the Committee's consideration and explained the reason why the deadline of three months, as set out in New Decade, New Approach, was not able to be met. If we had been in different circumstances than we find ourselves in today, the Committee would have brought these proposals to the House within the time frame of three months from the formation of the Executive in January 2020.

The Committee expedited the issue when it returned to normal proceedings in September and has fully considered the legal advice that it received. There was some opposition in the Committee to the amendment, and we have heard those concerns expressed in the House today. In particular, the political rationale behind the two-year period. However, in his response to the Committee, the Minister of State for Northern Ireland fully explained how that was determined.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. Is the Member content that the reason given is that the two-year limit exists for purely electoral purposes? Is he content and happy with the answer that we received in the Committee?

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

Mr T Buchanan: That was the response that was received when the Committee asked for the reason for the two-year period. That was the response from the Minister of State for Northern Ireland. That is the response that was received.

We have listened to the folk in the House today who have spoken on this. Sinéad Bradley spoke of the Committee being tasked with this issue as part of NDNA. As a Committee, we honoured our part in seeking to bring this issue forward. Kellie Armstrong also supported the change. Gerry Carroll outlined the concerns around the two-year rule, as he did in Committee, as did Jim Allister. However, I feel that, following an election, if parties within the Executive do not know after two years whether they want to go into opposition, it is a matter for them. They have a two-year space and a two-year opportunity. It is not that the Assembly or this change is against anything to do with an opposition; far from it. It is to set out the timeline for opposition. Surely if a party, for two years following an election, is not able to make up its mind on whether it wants to go into opposition, it is a matter for that party.

Finally, the New Decade, New Approach agreement is the basis under which all parties came back into the restored institutions. We need to try to move forward with the agreement. All parties have differences, and we will not agree with everything that is in New Decade, New Approach, but we have to collectively seek to try to take that forward. Today, the Committee and this House can lead by example and start to move forward.

In conclusion —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr T Buchanan: — I thank everyone for contributing to today's debate. Mr Allister had his opportunity to speak, and everyone has heard what everyone else had to say. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before we proceed to the Question, I remind everyone that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Allister: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that we should continue to uphold social

distancing and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come into the Chamber.

11.15 am

Before I put the Question again, I remind Members that, if possible, it would be preferable to avoid a Division.

Question put a second time.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Allister: 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. Members who are voting in the Lobbies should continue to respect social distancing, and, at all times, follow the instructions of the Clerks.

I ask all Members to be patient as we take time to ensure that voting is carried out in a safe and proper manner.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 80; Noes 5.

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Unionist

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr 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: Mr T Buchanan and Mr Harvey.

NOES

Unionist:

Mr Allister, Ms Sugden.

Other

Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Allister and Mr Carroll.

Total Votes	85	Total Ayes	80	[94.1%]
Nationalist Votes	38	Nationalist Ayes	38	[100.0%]
Unionist Votes	37	Unionist Ayes	35	[94.6%]
Other Votes	10	Other Ayes	7	[70.0%]

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey [Teller, Ayes], Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

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

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

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

Leave out Standing Order 45A and insert

"(1) Subject to paragraph (3), where, at a time when all Northern Ireland Ministers ceased to hold office, a party is entitled to nominate a person to hold ministerial office under section 18(2) to (6) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and declines to do so, that party may choose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition.

(2) Subject to paragraph (3), where, during the relevant period, a party is entitled to nominate a person to hold a ministerial office under section 18(10) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and declines to do so, that party may choose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition.

(3) A party is not to be recognised as part of the official Opposition if any member of that party holds a ministerial office.

(4) Where only one party chooses to be recognised in accordance with paragraph (1) or paragraph (2) that party is to be regarded as the official Opposition.

(5) In this order 'relevant period' means the period of 2 years beginning with the date on which the ministerial offices are filled under 16A(3)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998."

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

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

Private Members' Business

Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill [HL] 2019-21: Support

Ms Bunting: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes Anti-Slavery Day 2020, which seeks to raise awareness of human trafficking today; condemns the crime of human trafficking, which tragically happens in our society; welcomes the progress Northern Ireland has made, with the passage of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, and the work of the Department of Justice, statutory agencies, the PSNI and civil society organisations; calls for consideration of further support for victims of trafficking beyond the end of the support provided under the National Referral Mechanism (NRM); and calls on the UK Parliament to pass the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill [HL] 2019-21, which would give confirmed victims of trafficking who find themselves in Northern Ireland leave to remain for 12 months following the National Referral Mechanism so that they can receive the support they need to recover from their ordeal, and to make it possible for them to think about giving evidence against their traffickers in court, something that is essential to reverse the low conviction rates for traffickers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the motion.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful for the opportunity to open the debate on the subject of human trafficking. This Sunday, 18 October, marks Anti-Slavery Day, which is a day set aside to highlight the tragic reality that men, women and children continue to be trafficked for the purposes of exploitation in our world today. As an aside, that is why we are aiming to have the inaugural meeting of our all-party group (APG) on modern slavery next week: to highlight the issue and raise awareness. Some Members have indicated their support and interest in the matter, and I am grateful to them for that. I encourage them to come along so that we can continue to work on the subject together.

It is important to be clear what we mean when we talk about human trafficking. Human trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer and harbouring or receipt of individuals for the purposes of exploitation in the sex trade or for forced labour in, for example, car washes. It can happen within territories or between them. People smuggling is not the same as human trafficking, for the key reason that the former is not for the purposes of exploitation. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that over 40 million individuals were victims of trafficking around the world in 2016. Of course, because of the clandestine nature of the crime, it is impossible to know the exact figure. If that number is in any way accurate, however, it illustrates that it is a major global problem.

Members will know that human trafficking happens here in Northern Ireland and right across these islands. In 2020, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) produced a new estimate, suggesting that around 100,000 people across the United Kingdom are potential victims of the crime each year. Again, it is important to stress that that is an estimate, as, in practice, because of the very nature of the crime and the variable quality of available data, it is very challenging to be certain of the numbers of individuals who are trafficked at any one time.

Over the past three years in Northern Ireland, 171 potential victims of human trafficking have entered the National Referral Mechanism, which is the formal government process that was set up to identify and support victims of human trafficking in the United Kingdom. Each of those 171 men, women and children has a personal story. Victims of trafficking have been identified right across this jurisdiction, in urban and rural areas, but there may be many more who are trafficked in Northern Ireland, since it is widely recognised and accepted by the Department of Justice, statutory agencies, the PSNI and the civil society sector that that figure in no way marks the full number of victims of trafficking in our society.

It is important that I acknowledge that Northern Ireland has a positive record in responding to this horrendous crime. We have a world-leading legislative framework, which was passed by the House before I became a Member. The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, which was introduced by my friend and party colleague Lord Morrow when he was an MLA, was the first comprehensive piece of legislation to be passed on the issue in the United Kingdom. It was the product of significant cross-party working, for which the Minister of Justice's predecessor, David Ford, deserves credit, as do Members from other parties and Department of Justice officials. The requirement for support for victims of trafficking who have been identified here and the provision of independent guardians for unaccompanied migrant and trafficked children are particularly noteworthy elements that go beyond what is available in England and Wales.

As a member of the Policing Board, I am fully aware of how seriously the PSNI takes this crime and of the dedication of officers in identifying potential victims. Moreover, we are blessed to have an active civil society that seeks to respond to the crime here. I also know that the Minister and her Department take the crime seriously. I am grateful to her for meeting me and Lord Morrow earlier this year to discuss the subject. I am glad to see the Minister here for the debate, and I look forward to her response.

11.45 am

While there are positive aspects to our response to human trafficking, the motion raises ways in which we can do even better. I thank the Minister for the recent consultation on extending statutory support for victims of slavery as well as those trafficked. That has been happening in practice, but those victims deserve the full support of the law. However, the Human Trafficking Act mandates the Department to provide support only when victims are going through the NRM process. The Department does have discretion to provide support beyond the point at which a conclusive grounds decision is made. To the Department's credit, that has been utilised on a number of occasions.

For some confirmed victims, that system works well, as they may wish to return to their home country, or their circumstances do not require long-term support. In other cases, however, victims need more long-term assistance due to the trauma that they have been through.

A wonderful charity in my constituency called Flourish NI provides support to victims of trafficking who have exited the NRM. As the charity says on its website:

"Without support clients face significant barriers to moving on. Examples of these are: social isolation, re-exploitation, homelessness, poverty, mental health issues, alcohol or substance misuse and a general lack of capacity to thrive."

Many organisations that work with trafficking victims argue that they need longer-term support for their recovery. These individuals have been exploited here, and providing further support may help both to provide a sounder footing for victims of trafficking as they rebuild their lives and to improve evidence collection against the perpetrators of these dreadful crimes. I urge the Minister to commit to exploring with her Department and the relevant civil society organisations whether further support could be provided to confirmed victims who have left the NRM.

I want to speak about the Bill in Westminster which is mentioned in the motion. The Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill has been sponsored by Lord McColl, who, for over a decade, has been raising the issue of the need to support victims of trafficking. The Bill refers to immigration powers that are reserved to Westminster. The Bill would mandate the Home Office to provide immigration leave to victims getting discretionary support under section 18(9) of our Human Trafficking Act. It would also allow at least 12 months' leave to remain for identified victims of trafficking who meet certain criteria. That Bill would make a difference to Northern Ireland's victims. There is no right to such support at the moment. However, providing statutory immigration stability and security for confirmed victims would help to prevent re-trafficking and provide an environment in which victims are willing to assist police investigations into the perpetrators. I hope that, after hearing this debate, the Minister will use her good offices to push for this Bill to be taken up by the Government at Westminster.

In conclusion, I hope that all Members will support the motion and make clear our condemnation of the crime of human trafficking and our strong desire to support victims who find themselves in Northern Ireland.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Members who brought the motion. We will be supporting it. There has been much discussion recently about slavery and historical slavery. Whilst that is important, we need to acknowledge, and people need to be very well aware, that slavery is alive and kicking amongst our communities, right around us, and everywhere we live and work. We need to be aware of that, and we need to make our communities aware of it.

As a member of the Policing Board, the previous Member, as she outlined, is well aware of how seriously the PSNI takes this. We spoke yesterday about the need for greater numbers in the Police Service and the fact that there needs to be a focus on neighbourhood policing and policing with communities. That is really important in relation to this issue. We need to recognise the signs, but

if police officers are embedded in our communities and know the people in the communities, they will easily spot when something is not right within those communities. It is important that that is part of what they are doing.

Detective Inspector Mark Bell, of the PSNI's modern slavery and human trafficking unit, has acknowledged that modern slavery and human trafficking are among the fastest-growing types of crime. That is reflected in the statistics that we are now seeing, and is why it is important to have police officers embedded in our communities.

Slavery can take many forms: sexual exploitation, forced criminality, domestic servitude and even the removal of organs. It is a cruel and torturous crime. It is probably one of the most cruel and inhumane crimes because you are removing somebody's life but they still have to live. I am quite certain that there are people out there who are suffering from this crime who would much prefer not to be here, and I can fully understand that. As a mother, if it was my child, would I prefer that they were in that life or that their life was over? I really would find it difficult to choose between those two things.

The Modern Slavery Bill rightly focuses on those elements and aims to provide additional support to the victims. It aims to assist them through recovery and help them to bring offenders to justice, which is vital in our fight against this crime. I am happy to support the Bill. If passed, it will be important legislation in aiming to support victims, and I am broadly supportive of its provisions. However, I have some concerns.

The Bill actively supports adult victims of modern slavery and human trafficking in their physical, psychological and social recovery, which is vital. It is important to include access to safe and appropriate accommodation; material assistance, including financial assistance; medical advice and treatment; counselling; support workers; translation and interpretation services; legal advice and representation; and assistance with repatriation. There are also important safeguards, including that support measures must not be conditional on the person acting as a witness in any criminal proceedings and that they must be provided in a manner that takes account of the individual needs of that person. Furthermore, importantly, the Bill provides a statutory leave to remain in the UK to support adult victims of modern slavery. This is a crucial safeguard that will help to support the needs of the victim. It will also have the knock-on effect of bringing offenders to justice.

However, I have concerns about the 12-month limit because we have no way of knowing whether the case will come to court within those 12 months. We know about the delays in our legal system. We do not know if they will get the support that they need within those 12 months. Equally, we do not know if they are able to return to their home. If they have been taken as slaves and trafficked once, do we know that it will not happen again if they are sent back to where they came from? Do we know that the criminals who did that to them will not have access to them or their families? We are well aware that one of the biggest threats that is held over these people is, "We know where your families live". Some of them have children at home and are being told, "We know where your children are". We have to look at this in the round. I am not sure that 12 months sufficiently allows for that. I have real concerns. Many of the victims have been separated from their friends and

families, whose lives have moved on. Is there a home for them to go back to? So, the 12 months is welcome and we will support the motion. However, I would much prefer that the leave to remain can be indefinite if it needs to be.

Ms S Bradley: I support the motion and join other Members in condemning the abhorrent scourge that modern slavery is in our society. I hope that this debate helps to raise awareness of the realities of life for victims of modern slavery, who find themselves pushed into forced labour, domestic servitude and sexual exploitation. I also hope that the Assembly's support can help to ensure that the UK Government give the private Member's Bill the time to progress through Parliament. If this motion is agreed, and I sincerely hope it will be, it would be helpful for the Justice Minister to send a letter to the Home Secretary highlighting that.

The UK Home Office's responsibility for combating modern slavery comes into conflict with its zealous immigration enforcement. Unfortunately, the latter takes priority, despite the fact that a precarious immigration status, in itself, makes someone vulnerable to exploitation and can be the reason they do not seek help.

The Bill builds on the landmark 2015 Modern Slavery Act. I must take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the former SDLP MP for Foyle, Mark Durkan, who was the only MP from Northern Ireland on the Bill Committee and the treasurer of the all-party group on modern slavery and human trafficking.

The Bill will strengthen that legislation by ensuring that victims have at least 12 months. I take the points made by the Member, but the extension from 45 days to 12 months creates a broader window to answer the important questions that she asked.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Bradley: I will indeed.

Mr Catney: Does the Member agree that we, as a community, in 2020 should have zero tolerance for those who commit such crimes and that all the help that we can possibly give as a community should be given to those who have suffered from this evil crime?

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

Ms S Bradley: I thank Mr Catney for his intervention and agree wholeheartedly: any right-thinking person would be disgusted by what is in front of us today.

The extension to at least 12 months to receive the guaranteed support, after identification by the national referral mechanism, rather than the present paltry 45 days is welcome.

Although progress had been made, for the victims identified since the 2015 legislation came into force, the support has simply not been there to prevent them from becoming destitute or homeless or even from being re-trafficked and enslaved. Forty-five days is not only an arbitrary figure, it is shockingly inadequate to recover from the mental trauma, and the often violent physical abuse, inflicted on victims of modern slavery, let alone enough time to help them to rebuild some semblance of a stable life.

As the motion rightly notes, not only is this the right thing to do for victims but it will strengthen enforcement and, hopefully, improve conviction rates by increasing the likelihood of victims having enough confidence in themselves and in the justice system to give evidence against the perpetrators. Providing leave to remain for at least a year would shift away from the 45-day cliff edge to a needs-based tailored system that the Work and Pensions Select Committee and charities that support victims of trafficking and modern slavery support.

I hope that Anti-Slavery Day, and this debate to mark it, can act as a reminder to the public at large of the signs of modern slavery and human trafficking so that we can all be alert to them. By recognising the signs of modern slavery, we, as public representatives, and our constituents can make the work of the PSNI and other public bodies even more effective and help to bring the perpetrators to justice. It is by equipping as many people as possible to spot the signs of this dehumanising crime that we begin to dismantle the perpetrators' power. That is why I welcome the guidance issued to local councils to help their workers to identify signs of modern slavery.

Similarly, I would be grateful to hear from the Minister what assessment she has made for the guidance to become available to other public bodies in identifying slavery. I am particularly thinking about staff in jobs and benefits offices, given that controlling someone's benefits is a known tactic of the gangmasters. I am also conscious that the Bill deals with the fact that children can be victims of this appalling crime. Has any thought been given to specific guidance on identifying child victims?

Finally, I am sure that the Minister is conscious that, at the end of the year, we will become the only part of the UK that has a land border with an EU country, which could make us a target for enslavers and traffickers, who see an opportunity in the loss of the European arrest warrant. It is vital that there be robust North/South cooperation to ensure that our capabilities and enforcement are not reduced. I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on that.

Mr Beattie: This is a good motion and debate. There are some great points coming out, and no doubt we will hear some more really good points from people who are far more learned than I am.

Going out of lane slightly, I have seen human slavery and trafficking at its starting point. I was in Kosovo in 1999 as part of Operation Agricola while ethnic cleansing and criminal gangs were rife. I went to a car showroom just outside the town of Prizren with members of the Italian Carabinieri.

Prizren is close to the border with Albania and North Macedonia. Of course, it was not North Macedonia then; it was the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In that car showroom, there were no cars. The cars had either been stolen or sold. Probably stolen, then sold.

12.00 noon

There was, however, another commodity: people, mostly women, some who were as young as 14 years of age. They were being kept in inhumane conditions. They had been beaten, sexually assaulted, starved and drugged. You may think that I have seen a movie where something like that was shown, and you have probably seen a movie that looks like that. Let me tell you: it is nothing like that

when you come across the real thing and see bodies huddled together, fearful and frightened. That smell of body odour, alcohol, drugs, toilets full of human faeces backed up because there are no sanitary conditions, piss-stained mattresses, piss-stained clothing, that coppery taste of blood on your tongue that you kind of imagine but is actually there from the beatings and from the women not being given menstrual products. There is a feeling of fear, a feeling of hopelessness and a feeling of despair among those poor wretched beings.

I saw something similar in 1995 when I was in Bosnia when the Dayton Agreement was being signed. That agreement created a space for criminal gangs to operate in, and, yes, they did operate, and their target was young women for sexual exploitation. I went back to Bosnia in 2004 and it was still happening. They had just got more sophisticated. I returned in 1999, and, when I think about those women whom I found in that car showroom, I remember that it took six days to get them to Pristina hospital and then back to their families. I accompanied one girl back to her family — a 19-year-old girl — and saw that sense of joy on the faces of her family at the return of their daughter, because they thought that she had been killed in the war. I then watched their faces turn to absolute devastation when they realised what their daughter had just been put through.

This is human misery. Human trafficking, exploitation and slavery are about human misery, and it happens here in Northern Ireland. If we do not future-proof our legislation, it will come here more and more in the years to come. Last year, there were, I think, 59 cases of human trafficking. That will do nothing but increase, and those people who are responsible for it should be subject to the full rigours of the law. If they are from Northern Ireland, they must get a long custodial sentence to act as a deterrent. If they are not from here and have abused the system to come here to make a better life for themselves only to engage in human trafficking and slavery, they should do their custodial sentence, and then we send them home. Get them out of here.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: Yes, of course.

Mr Butler: The Member paints a really grim picture of the link between criminal gangs and human trafficking. Does he believe that we need to target our efforts here towards looking at those international links between criminal gangs?

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

Mr Beattie: Absolutely. Northern Ireland might be the endgame, but it is not the starting point. Chains of people bring people into Northern Ireland for human trafficking, purely to make money. That is all it is for. That human misery is to do nothing other than make money.

The Ulster Unionist Party will never apologise for standing up for the victim, and, if victims want to go home, let them go home. If they want to stay here, let them stay here and let us support them. If they need asylum, let us give it to them, and let us make sure that victims get the choice.

I am 55 today, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is my birthday. I was in my mid-30s when I came across that scene. It has

stayed with me since, but I walked away from it. Other people are still living it —

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

Mr Beattie: — and that is why the motion is so important.

Mr Blair: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the motion, which rightly addresses the reality of modern slavery and, in turn, raises awareness. Like other Members, I would like to thank the Members who tabled the motion.

When considered in historical terms, the word “slavery” conjures up images that it seemed had been relegated firmly to the past, but the reality is that more people are enslaved today than at any time in history. Whether globally or locally, the statistics are shocking, and, of course, they relate to real lives that have been adversely impacted by corruption and exploitation. Last week, a United Nations report estimated that 29 million women and girls are victims of modern-day slavery. They are exploited by practices including forced labour, debt bondage and domestic servitude. That means that, potentially, one in every 130 women and girls is living in modern slavery and is dehumanised and treated as a commodity or property.

It is a global and local problem, and it is happening here in Northern Ireland. Slavery has no place in modern society, and we have an opportunity to condemn practices that exploit the most vulnerable and condemn trafficking as a violation of basic human rights.

I firmly believe that slavery in the modern context can be eradicated for good. I would like to take the opportunity to applaud the Department of Justice for the considerable research and work that has already taken place on tackling human trafficking; the important work of contracted providers for their support services; and the progress that the Department has made towards eliminating modern-day slavery locally. I am sure that the Minister will give us more detail on some of those issues when she responds to the debate.

I must also commend the work of the PSNI's modern slavery and human trafficking unit, which, with other agencies across the island and beyond, has continued to work with an increasing number of referrals, thus helping more of those who have been exploited and are suffering. That work, which is sometimes publicised, though often not, is taking place across our constituencies, and it will be aided by the raising of awareness such as will result from the motion and debate.

The motion calls for increased protection through the National Referral Mechanism and seeks to extend the period of protection for those who are most in need due to modern slavery, exploitation and servitude. It seeks to protect those who are most vulnerable and in need of time to recover, and to assist with investigations into crimes. Amending section 18 will build on work done in 2016 by my predecessor, David Ford, as Justice Minister to extend assistance and support to potential victims of slavery. It will also enhance and extend the work done by Members and former Members, such as that outlined by Joanne Bunting in proposing the motion.

As an Assembly, we acknowledge Anti-Slavery Day 2020 and the important work of other organisations in raising awareness of human trafficking and campaigning against

modern-day slavery. With colleagues on these Benches, I am happy to support the motion.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the debate on this very important motion and associate myself with the excellent speech by my colleague Joanne Bunting.

As a Member during the passing of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act, I am pleased to say that it was an Act that illustrated the House at its collaborative best and showed what can be done when we all work together.

I want to raise two specific points. My first point is whether slavery and trafficking risk orders should be introduced here. The recently published annual report by Dame Sara Thornton, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, stated:

“In Northern Ireland the legislation did not include risk orders but I urged the minister for justice when I met her in February 2020 to reconsider their value as evidence of effective use in England and Wales and Scotland emerges.”

I know that, during the passage of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act, the Department consulted on introducing those orders, but it opted not to introduce them due to concerns about civil liberties: unlike the slavery and trafficking prevention orders, they can be imposed without a conviction. The time has come for the Department to reconsider whether such risk orders should be introduced.

I note that the 2019 report of the independent review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was very positive about risk orders and encouraged their greater use in England and Wales. I hope that in due course we will hear from the Justice Minister that she has committed her Department to reviewing whether Northern Ireland should introduce such risk orders.

Secondly, I raise my concern, and this has been mentioned, about the low number of convictions that have been secured for human trafficking offences here. We have victims and offences numbering in the hundreds, but only nine individuals have been prosecuted for trafficking offences in the last three years and only four convictions have been secured. That will be a concern to Members: if perpetrators are not apprehended and punished for this crime, they will deem it worth the risk to engage in this kind of activity. I know that prosecuting these crimes can be very difficult, and I hope that the Justice Minister will comment later on why she thinks that we have been unable to secure more convictions and on what action her Department can take to improve matters. I hope that she will write to the Members who spoke today and to the Justice Committee about the issues that have been raised.

I also ask her to tell Members when the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) will publish guidance on prosecuting cases. That has still not been published in the five years since the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act was passed. The House passed a world-leading piece of legislation, which was commended in the House of Lords last week. We also need to lead in tackling this crime through real action, and that can be done by ensuring that the perpetrators are brought to justice. We know that criminal cases are more effectively prosecuted when the victim is able to give evidence, but without long-term support and immigration security, there is little incentive for victims, who are already dealing with trauma, to get involved in a criminal case.

The Northern Ireland trafficking legislation led the way on providing support to victims while they are in the National Referral Mechanism. The Assembly had the foresight to recognise that some victims would continue to need support. It has become evident since then that a longer commitment to victims is needed. I sincerely hope that the Assembly will revisit that.

We are, of course, constrained in how long a victim can receive services by the length of time that they can legally remain here if they are not a UK national. That is why I support Lord McColl's Westminster Bill, which would provide statutory immigration rights to victims so that they can stay in the UK while they receive services. I support the motion.

Ms Rogan: Modern slavery is a severe exploitation of people for personal or commercial gain. Modern slavery is all around us, but you often just cannot see it. People can become trapped while making our clothes, serving our food, picking our crops, working in factories or even when working in homes as cooks, cleaners or nannies. From the outside, it can look like they have a normal job, but they face threats of violence, inescapable debt or having their passports taken away. Many fall into that trap simply because they are trying to escape poverty, insecurity or even war, and many are trying to improve their life and to support their family. It is estimated that 40 million people are trapped in modern slavery worldwide, and one in four are children and almost three quarters are women and girls.

Modern slavery and human trafficking has been acknowledged by the PSNI's modern slavery and human trafficking unit as one of the fastest growing crime types in the UK. The most recently released statistics show that, between April and October 2019, the PSNI had 54 referrals to the National Referral Mechanism, which compares with 33 for the same time in 2018. That was only for six and a half months, whereas 59 potential victims of human trafficking were identified in the whole of the previous year. We expect more up-to-date figures to be published in the next couple of weeks, and whilst I hope that we will see a great deal of improvement, I am deeply concerned that this ever-increasing crime is on a negative and dangerous path. Behind every figure is a person: a person who has a family and friends and a life and rights. All those things are very often taken so cruelly by traffickers, who then exploit their victims.

It rips apart victims' lives and robs them of their human rights.

12.15 pm

The Department of Justice and the Assembly have done a lot of work, which is very welcome, in tackling modern slavery and human trafficking. It aims to prevent people from getting drawn into slavery by reducing the vulnerability of those who may be targeted by traffickers and enslavers and ensures that the public are equipped to spot the signs of exploitation and report any suspicions.

The then Justice Minister, Claire Sugden, stated in the second annual Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery Strategy:

"I recognise that complete eradication of this crime is an aspirational aim, but one which we should all strive towards in delivering this strategy."

The House of Lords' Bill will assist us in our efforts to deliver on that aim, and, for that reason, I am happy to support the motion. However, I echo my colleagues' concerns that the 12-month limit to the statutory provision of support in the Bill is not enough, nor is the 12 months leave to remain.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. It is right that every Member in the House would obviously condemn modern slavery in all its forms. I ask this, as a rhetorical question: how many Members have used or will use the unregulated car washes where it is known that modern slavery has taken place?

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

Ms Rogan: I thank the Member for his intervention.

I noted earlier the vast array of implications that modern slavery can have for victims and that such impacts are so profound that it is unfair to expect a full recovery to take place in such a short time. I would like to see a statutory requirement on the state to provide support and leave to remain for as long as is necessary to facilitate victims' recovery. Nonetheless, I support the motion.

Last week, in the House, a Member said that it was not the time for strategies. Now is the time for this strategy. Now is the time to get this right. A great saying that, sometimes, we need to be reminded of is, "A goal without a plan is only a wish." People who are subjected to trafficking and modern slavery need much more than just a wish.

Mr Frew: I commend the Member for East Belfast, my colleague and friend Joanne Bunting for tabling the motion. It is a very good debate, and it is good that we have consensus across the House.

The Conservative peer Lord McColl, a long-standing campaigner for the rights of trafficked individuals, has tabled the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill, which awaits debate in the House of Lords. The Bill has two aims. It will provide statutory support for potential victims of trafficking in England and Wales through the National Referral Mechanism process. It will bring that jurisdiction into line with what we already have in Northern Ireland. The Bill also has an impact on the immigration status of confirmed victims of trafficking who are identified here. As Members know, immigration is a matter reserved for Westminster.

I note the comments made by Lord Kennedy of Southwark, representing the Labour Front Bench, during the debate on the Westminster immigration Bill last week. He stated that Northern Ireland's legislation on trafficking is generally regarded as more superior to the legislation in England and Wales. He went on to call for England and Wales to follow what we have done on support for victims. I add my voice to that call. We should commend ourselves in the House when we make historic and brave decisions around legislation.

At this point, let me commend Lord Morrow, because he saw something before anybody else. He saw a route, through legislation, to provide resolution and safety for people and victims. I commend Lord Morrow for his foresight in his cutting-edge Bill, which really made a difference to this jurisdiction and victims.

Lord McColl's Bill will provide immigration leave for confirmed victims in two circumstances: first, during the time that an individual receives discretionary support under section 18(9) of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act, and, secondly, a victim who meets particular criteria could receive leave to remain and recourse to public funds for at least 12 months.

Being identified as a victim of trafficking does not currently provide any right to remain, in contrast to the welcome provision for refugees, where recognition as a refugee grants an initial period of five years' leave to remain in the UK. Currently, discretionary leave to remain can be granted to victims of trafficking. It is, however, granted only when victims are not eligible for any other form of leave.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking the intervention. Does he agree with me that granting leave to remain is a persistent problem, particularly for women in such circumstances? Moreover, we recognised it as an issue in our recent discussions on the Domestic Abuse Bill. There is therefore a real need to bring perpetrators to justice.

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

Mr Frew: Thank you for that intervention. I agree that we need to look at this again and resolve the issue once and for all. Remember that, when we pass legislation, it is not set in stone. It can be amended and improved on. That agility should be welcomed, pushed for and persevered with.

Victims of all nationalities, including British citizens, are trafficked in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, there is no data on how many victims have or do not have leave to remain. We know that the UK Government consider discretionary leave to remain to be an option only in exceptional circumstances. Different data sources suggest that only 8% or 12% of victims get discretionary leave.

The needs of EU victims post-Brexit were recognised by the House of Lords last week in a vote to ensure that victims get leave to remain if they meet very similar criteria to those currently applied to discretionary leave. EU victims are trafficked into Northern Ireland, so clause 12 as it stands of the Westminster Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill will impact on victims here. Those sorts of immigration rights should be available to all nationalities, as needed, however. Some victims will want to return home, but others, who are currently required to leave the UK, will be put in circumstances that led them to be vulnerable to trafficking in the first place.

I therefore support the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill, because the immigration rights that it would provide will apply to all victims, regardless of nationality. Clause 2 would help to reduce the risk of victims being re-trafficked. It would provide much-needed certainty and stability for victims, who have often gone through deeply traumatic experiences, and it might enable victims to provide more evidence to the PSNI for the purpose of seeking prosecutions.

I hope that Members across the House can and will support the motion and show the Government that it would be a positive move forward for victims here. It is a global issue and a global problem. Let Northern Ireland, and the

UK, play its part in bringing an end to modern trafficking and slavery.

Ms Dolan: According to Anti-Slavery International, slavery is so common that it is possible for you to come across victims of it regularly. It is an inexcusable abuse of basic human rights. People can become entrapped, be it to clean houses and flats, to produce the clothes that we wear, to pick the fruit and vegetables that we eat, to dig for the minerals that are used in our smartphones and make-up, and to work on construction sites. Many, many victims can become entrapped in the sex industry, being horribly exploited into forced prostitution, criminality and, in some cases, even organ removal.

Human trafficking can affect anyone of any age, gender or nationality. In many cases, people are forcibly removed from their homeland and away from their family and friends to be exploited in another country. Many of them end up on our shores, being trafficked under our very nose.

Between 2017 and 2020, the PSNI recorded 108 human-trafficking and exploitation crimes in this jurisdiction. Over the past three years, nine individuals have been prosecuted for human-trafficking offences, and four convictions have been secured. I appreciate that such cases are often very complex and that the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) take them very seriously. The low conviction rates remain a matter of significant concern, however. Something that can reverse that, or at least aim to tackle it, is giving victims the support that they need to recover from their ordeal and to make it possible for them to think about giving evidence against their traffickers in court.

Modern slavery affects people of every colour, age and gender, but it is more prevalent among vulnerable people. Therefore, in the "pursue, protect and prevent" approach in the modern slavery strategy 2019-2020, it is the prevent strand that I find imperative: reducing the threat of modern slavery by reducing vulnerability and demand and by raising awareness is critical. Peter May, the permanent secretary of the Department of Justice, got it in one when he said:

"we also recognise the need to prevent people from getting drawn into slavery in the first place by reducing the vulnerability of those who may be targeted by traffickers and enslavers; ensuring that the general public is equipped to spot the signs of exploitation and report any suspicions; and by seeking to tackle demand."

Modern slavery is very much a hidden issue, with many people oblivious to the fact that, incredible as it may seem, this crime is happening right under our noses. Therefore, awareness raising must be an increasingly important task. I welcome the Department of Justice's awareness-raising campaign, which has seen it work in partnership with local councils, the emergency services, public and private and organisations and a wide range of civil-sector organisations. It is important that we continue to educate the public and, importantly, ourselves to be alert to the signs that someone may be a victim and report suspicious activity to the PSNI or the modern slavery helpline.

Our legislation was commended in Westminster, when it was remarked that the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act is generally

regarded as superior to the legislation in force in England and Wales. However, we must not become complacent. The harsh reality is that cold, cruel traffickers and enslavers continue to operate here. So, as we approach Anti-Slavery Day on 18 October, I echo the call in the motion for the British Parliament to pass the Modern Slavery Bill. We must remember that everyone everywhere has the right to a life free from slavery.

Mr McGrath: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important motion. Human trafficking is a scourge that we must unequivocally condemn. There is no justification for this evil, which continues to permeate and infect us. It is a tragedy that we may never know the full extent and depth of those who have been trafficked against their will, as the crime often goes unreported. It is a crime that mocks us, as its victims and survivors are out in the open while the perpetrators cowardly hide in the shadows.

As we discuss human trafficking today, let us not forget that modern slavery has many forms and hides behind many faces. It is found in the trafficking of people into crime and also in the forcing of men, women and children into sexual exploitation; it is found in domestic slavery, forced labour and in many other guises.

Let me reiterate that I utterly condemn the faceless cowards who traffic adults and children against their will. All today's contributions have addressed those who willingly perpetrate this evil and those who have survived it.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. I thank everyone for their contributions. As the father of three children and the grandfather of three grandchildren, I think not only of those who find themselves taken away from their families but of the families left behind with the pain and the grief of wondering where their children are. That is why I say to all of you who have contributed that the message that we need to send out from the House today is one of zero tolerance.

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

Mr McGrath: I thank my colleague for his contribution. That reminds us of the fact that these individuals are members of families; they are brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers. They are relatives who are taken away and abused, perhaps never seeing their family again. That is a position that many of us would never be able even to comprehend, but it is something that many people in, and outside, our society have to deal with.

To those cowards who perpetrate this evil, we say: you will be exposed for your crimes; we will catch up with you eventually. To the heroes who have survived these crimes, we say: your strength has inspired so many others to act. You deserve our thanks.

The motion comes with two caveats that we should be aware of and be cautious of. The first is the legislation itself. Its drive is to support, which I welcome, but it also contains a clause that says:

"A person may be refused immigration bail, assistance and support or leave to remain ... if ... the Secretary of State considers that the person poses a genuine, present and serious risk to members of the public."

Given the Home Secretary's threat to withhold food from Ireland, and her stupid and, frankly, dangerous rhetoric

on immigration itself, that does not instil me with any confidence.

12.30 pm

That leads to the second caveat that, while I have every confidence in a great many of the Members of Parliament, there exists a number of them, most of whom are on the Front Benches of the present Government, whose track record on human rights is beyond abhorrent. What sort of Government would willingly change a system that allows child refugees to stay united with their family in the UK and Ireland? What does it say about the UK that it currently accepts only 1% of the refugees from across the world, or that it would willingly pursue such a reckless Brexit process that will cause further complications? The present occupier of Number 10 is not one to whom we should look when seeking legislation that champions and embraces human rights.

We support this motion, but I suggest that when we do call on the UK Parliament to pass this legislation, we do so in the strongest terms possible. I suggest that we act as a good friend and remind them of where they have fallen short in the past.

Finally, should the UK Parliament pass this legislation, I do not think for one moment that it will excuse the UK Government of their past abuses of human rights around the world and in Ireland.

Ms Sheerin: I support this motion, and I welcome the consensus in the House on this issue.

This Sunday, 18 October, people across the world will recognise and celebrate Anti-Slavery Day. For many, it will be a poignant time to take stock of and acknowledge the pain felt by the generations that have gone before, perhaps recalling the journeys taken by ancestors, chained and bound on a ship, to a country that they now call home.

Whilst that might be the image that springs to mind when we think of the term "slavery", this Sunday also serves as an opportunity to assert opposition to the slavery that still exists today. Victims of human trafficking for forced prostitution, organ donation or forced labour; people working in sweat shops and underground factories; people trapped in a familial cycle of unpaid labour or debt-based exploitation — all of them are human beings, but all of them are being treated as if they are not.

The nature of what we are discussing means that all of that activity is underground, conducted under a horrible cloak of darkness, and accurate statistics are difficult to obtain. The charity, Anti-Slavery International, estimates that 40 million people worldwide are trapped in slavery, one in four of whom are children. This is something that disproportionately affects females, as 71% of those deemed to be victims of slavery are women and girls. The picture painted by Mr Beattie needs no exaggeration.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member take an intervention?

Ms Sheerin: I will.

Ms Dillon: Given the point that the Member has just made, and in relation to the Domestic Abuse Bill, is it not time for us to look at a women and girls strategy? This type of crime is one of the most degrading and inhumane that exists, and it disproportionately affects women and girls.

The Executive and the Assembly need to look at a women and girls strategy.

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

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for her intervention, and I agree. Mr Beattie painted a picture of a sobering and depressing reality, but it is only a thought for us. When we think of the strides that the women's movement has made, internationally, and how many glass ceilings we have broken to attain equality on many fronts, including the battle for equal pay for an equal day's work, it beggars belief that we still have human beings who are treated like they are in a chain gang, breaking rocks for a road that they will never get to walk on.

The Act passed in 2015 no doubt provided significant support to victims, but further work is needed. COVID-19 has had an impact on the detection of cases, just as it has on everything else this year. We can see from statistics that the NRM received 2,209 referrals in the second quarter of 2020, a 23% decrease in referrals when compared to the first quarter of the year.

As we all went into lockdown, those engaged in exploitation, it seems, were allowed greater cover.

One story that resulted in the convictions of eight human traffickers last July in Poland demonstrates how crime gangs prey on the desperation and vulnerability of their victims before trapping them in a cycle of despair. The gang trafficked their victims to England on a promise of a better life, but the account of one such victim — a former Foreign Legion soldier — told of a journey into the UK that quickly turned into enslavement, beatings, starvation, a loss of dignity and an all-out attack on human decency.

It is often said that you can judge society by how it treats the most vulnerable. If we turn a blind eye to the plight of those trapped in slavery, we give a damning indictment of ourselves. The British Government, once the authority of the biggest empire in the world — the leading colonial power, which was responsible for the entrapment of so many into slavery across the world — would go some way to righting the wrongs of the past by passing the Bill. I echo at this point the remarks of Sinéad Bradley in condemning the British Government's hostile environment policy, which does nothing to guard against the fear that is felt by those who are desperate to escape whatever it is that they are trying to get away from.

We welcome the requirement that the Bill would put in statute to support adult victims in their physical, psychological and social recovery, including access to accommodation and financial assistance, but the leave to remain in the UK for 12 months does not, in our opinion, go far enough, as my colleagues have stated. There is no way to prescribe an appropriate recovery time. You cannot force someone to recover from such an experience within a scheduled time frame, so we support provisions that enable support and leave to remain for an unlimited period, which would effectively support recovery. We support the motion.

Ms Armstrong: I will not repeat what so many have said, but it is worth pointing out that trafficking and modern slavery are a disgusting underbelly of criminal activity that affects not just Northern Ireland but the whole world. It is right that, on Anti-Slavery Day this Sunday, as many others have said, we raise further awareness of trafficking.

Most people think that it has to be somebody who is stolen against their will and brought into this country, but, often, it is not just those people. There are people in Northern Ireland today, tomorrow and the next day who will be affected by trafficking. Unfortunately, you have only to watch the cars pull up outside some of our children's homes to see some of the traffickers who take our children out, ply them with drugs and sell them for sex. We have car washes, as has been mentioned by Mr Newton, we have nail bars and we have domestic service. We have people who are being sold for sex on a regular basis today in Northern Ireland.

There are organisations that I have the absolute privilege to know, and I thank them for hosting an Invisible Traffick event in the Long Gallery a number of years ago where we heard the harrowing experience of a lady from Belfast who had been taken by somebody whom, she thought, she loved and sold for five years for sex and prostitution in Dublin. It is not always people who come from outside; people are doing it here, now and every day. I would love to see not just the Minister of Justice but the whole Executive make a real committed effort to get rid of trafficking. For instance, as many Members will know, I am a geek on transport, and I would love to see the certificate for professional competence for haulage drivers include a section that makes them aware of trafficking and ensures that they know that they do not carry people as produce in their lorries. I would love to see more coming from Health to stop those children's homes allowing drug dealers to take our children away. We need to find the victims, and we need to give them support. It is vital that the public know how to spot the signs. The traffickers, who are men and women, make those victims' lives intolerable.

Lord McColl of Dulwich seeks in his private Member's Bill of 2017, which was reintroduced in January 2020, to amend the Modern Slavery Act 2015 by extending the time that victims are entitled to support to 12 months and to guarantee leave to remain for victims during that time, but the UK Government have already said that they do not support leave to remain. I ask the Minister to let us know about the work that she can do and any action that she can take to support victims here. I want her to know that I absolutely thank her, her Department, the statutory agencies, the police and civic society organisations like Invisible Traffick, which operates dedicated support for those who have been trafficked and raises awareness in schools, businesses, the haulage industry and ports. I am absolutely astonished that an organisation like Invisible Traffick goes out and talks to people who work at our ports, helping them to recognise the signs of a trafficked person by looking out for people who do not have any language skills and are unable to speak to anyone, to give them safe words that they can use with people at a reception desk to let somebody know that they have been trafficked and to watch out for people who do not lift their head, keep their head down and constantly look at the person who is threatening them to keep quiet.

It is time that we stopped this in Northern Ireland. It is time that we supported our agencies to ensure that they can support victims. We should not send victims home and back to the sort of life that would end up bringing them back here. We should not let looked-after children be treated in the way in which we do. We have the opportunity here and now, as a whole Assembly, to say that we

support the motion, we want something better and we want victims to be supported.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Clare Bailey. The Member has up to four minutes in which to speak.

Ms Bailey: As we have heard, human trafficking is the fastest-growing trade and the second-largest criminal trade in the world after arms dealing. The trade in people and weapons is global and has huge profits. As was mentioned, it is estimated that, at present, 40 million people live as slaves across the world. I thank Mr Beattie for giving us a vivid and powerful picture of the lived reality for many of those people. Members, we should never let that picture go. If I could do anything to add to it, I would invite Members to consider the animal who pays to abuse those victims.

We do not have a true picture of the extent of this evil in Northern Ireland, but it is here. We know that, in 2018, 59 victims of trafficking were identified in Northern Ireland. Fifteen of those victims were children. Those victims require our support. They require justice, legal redress and compensation. Victims of trafficking and slavery still face significant practical barriers to obtaining compensation, for example, for the abuses that have been committed against them. Current systems have to be adjusted to accommodate a victim-centred approach that ensures legal remedies and compensation for victims.

The National Referral Mechanism is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery to ensure that they receive appropriate support. It grants them a 45-day reflection and recovery period. However, a caseworker then decides whether those individuals get a referral and should be considered to be victims of trafficking. All children, irrespective of their immigration status, are entitled to safeguarding and protection under law. Children who have been trafficked do not have to go through that mechanism. Sectoral organisations have expressed major concerns about the National Referral Mechanism. It involves poor decision-making; a worrying lack of child-specific knowledge and child safeguarding; an inappropriate focus on immigration; and a lack of training, formal recovery and a reflection period and specialist support for children. I add my voice to calls for support beyond the end of the NRM. The Green Party also calls for a system to identify child victims of trafficking that is non-discriminatory, child-centred and uses a model that effectively identifies trafficked children without considering their nationality or immigration status, builds on existing child protection structures, recognises child trafficking as child abuse and recognises that a child cannot give informed consent in relation to exploitation.

As we have discussed, the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill will give victims of trafficking a guaranteed right to remain for a minimum of 12 months. As we know, that is also intended to allow victims to receive support and, perhaps, give evidence in court. Court cases can often take an awful lot longer than a year to complete. We know that very well here.

Furthermore, as we have talked about, returning a survivor to their home country can result in re-traumatisation. Survivors can experience stigma, be blamed for their victimisation and face discrimination when seeking housing or employment. We listen to them, we hear them, and we know this.

12.45 pm

In conclusion, I welcome and support the motion. I will use this opportunity to pay tribute to every single victim and survivor of human trafficking, to every person who works to support them and to those working to tackle this crime head-on. We know that we have a very real challenge ahead of us. Modern slavery must be tackled by providing robust support for victims, by preventing of re-trafficking and by redoubling our efforts to secure the prosecution of the traffickers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I will ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Bailey: Thank you very much.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Minister of Justice, Naomi Long, has up to 15 minutes to respond to the debate.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I am grateful to the Members who tabled the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate.

As the comments made during the debate show, there is unanimous support across the Assembly for ensuring that the response to tackling human trafficking and modern slavery in Northern Ireland is robust and that our support for those affected is victim-centred. It is abhorrent that slavery, in any form, is happening today. Tackling modern slavery and human trafficking is a key priority for me as Justice Minister, so I welcome the opportunity to share what we have been doing, working in partnership with law enforcement partners and civil society.

As part of our strategic response, I recently concluded consultations on two proposed changes to our human trafficking legislation. Consultees were overwhelmingly supportive of both. The first is to amend section 12 to enable a three-year strategy rather than an annual strategy to be developed. The second is to amend section 18 to extend support to victims of slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour. These amendments will enhance our strategic response and further secure the support that is provided to victims. I recently shared the outcome of the consultations with the Justice Committee and will provide for the changes in a miscellaneous provisions Bill.

Whilst the Department of Justice leads on tackling modern slavery, we work with a wide range of other statutory and civil society partners, and this is reflected in our refreshed modern slavery strategy for next year, which will issue for public consultation later this week. We also recognise the linkages between organised crime and immigration, which others raised in the debate today. Modern slavery is dealt with via the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) structures, which include Border Force and immigration.

Support and protection for victims of modern slavery, however, is central to the strategy, which has a continued focus on building capacity among front-line professionals to help them to recognise the signs of modern slavery and make the appropriate referrals. The draft strategy also places an emphasis on pursuing those responsible for these heinous crimes. Those cases are extremely complex, and securing a prosecution is challenging. The fact that there have been only four convictions under the human trafficking legislation over the last three years underlines this fact.

Where it is not possible to secure prosecutions for trafficking, other offences are considered. Each year, a number of investigations relate to potential victims who declare historical modern slavery or human trafficking that occurred in other countries. Although these investigations are taken forward as far as possible, they may be less likely to lead to prosecutions and convictions due to the length of time that has elapsed, the changes of investigations relating to conflict zones or through lack of evidence such as a named offender.

Over recent years, the PSNI has enhanced its capacity to tackle these crimes and will, along with other law enforcement agencies, continue to pursue offenders using all available tools. In parallel with the work to pursue offenders, it is equally important that we raise awareness of these crimes to prevent and detect them at an early stage and to support and protect the victims.

First, I turn to support for adult victims. Section 18 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act sets out the assistance and support provided to all adult potential victims whose cases are being assessed through the National Referral Mechanism. The support and assistance provided include appropriate and safe accommodation, financial assistance, healthcare services, translation and interpretation services, assistance in obtaining legal advice or representation and assistance with repatriation where that is required. Over the last six years, in total, almost 250 people have been supported. In 2019-2020, of the 81 people who entered support, 71 received support for periods in excess of 90 days. In most cases, support was provided for closer to a year, which is the average time taken by the single competent authority to make a conclusive decision.

Standards of victim support here were enhanced through the re-procurement of our central support contract in 2018, when Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid and Migrant Help were successful in securing the support contract for a three-year period. In order to ensure that potential victims of trafficking were safeguarded during the COVID-19 crisis, I approved a temporary extension of support for adult victims of modern slavery who were due to exit our support. I will return in a little more detail to the support that is provided to adult victims of human trafficking when I address the second part of the motion.

I will turn now to support for child victims of human trafficking and modern slavery. There are cross-agency operational arrangements in place to safeguard child victims, or potential victims, of modern slavery and human trafficking here. Those arrangements include the immediate appointment of an independent guardian for all such children, including internally trafficked children for whom no one is exercising parental responsibility. The independent guardian service is intended to strengthen the overall safeguarding and care arrangements for child victims, or potential child victims, of trafficking. Specific functions of independent guardians include assisting and supporting the children and young people by listening to their views and making representation to and liaising closely with all other relevant agencies in order to secure their immediate future care and protection. In 2019-2020, 14 referrals of potential child victims of modern slavery were made to the National Referral Mechanism.

Sunday was also International Day of the Girl, so it is right that Members have reflected that the power imbalances

and gender inequalities in our world make women and girls vulnerable to human trafficking and slavery. What we do to deliver equality also helps to protect those vulnerable people.

As we approach national Anti-Slavery Day on 18 October, the motion provides an excellent opportunity to shine the spotlight on the issues and allows the Northern Ireland Assembly to play its part in raising awareness of this abhorrent crime. Extensive work is being taken forward by statutory and non-statutory partners to raise awareness of the indicators of slavery and human trafficking and to help people feel more confident about spotting and reporting suspicious activity. My Department has invested in raising awareness with front-line workers. That investment, coupled with proactive operational work with the PSNI's modern slavery and human trafficking unit, helps to uncover more instances of potential modern slavery.

All first responders receive annual training. In recent months, a new online resource that was designed specifically for first responders has been developed and rolled out. The public's ability, however, to identify and report their suspicions is crucial, as is their ability to recognise that, with their choices — Members referred to car washing and other high-risk areas — they too have a role in addressing it. We have joined with partners on the modern slavery and human trafficking subgroup of the OCTF to deliver a Twitter campaign that is running this week, and, over the coming year, the Department, in conjunction with Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), plans to roll out further awareness training to front-line council workers and PCSPs. Furthermore, a further assessment of the training needs of front-line Department for Community staff in benefits offices will be progressed as part of next year's strategy.

In 2019-2020, the National Referral Mechanism's referrals almost doubled. Greater awareness of the signs and indicators of modern slavery is likely to have contributed to that.

With regard to future policy development and to address one of the key elements of the motion, I broadly agree with the call for consideration of further support for victims of trafficking. I want to look into that further to ensure that we continue to provide an individualised needs-based approach.

We have a discretionary power to extend support and assistance after a positive conclusive decision in cases where it is considered necessary to do so. Over the past four years, that discretion has been used on 23 occasions. Support under the Human Trafficking Act is not intended to be permanent. Support providers work with individuals from when they enter support in order to identify longer-term stable plans for when they exit that support, but I think that we are all agreed that victims need and deserve support to help them to recover and move on from their traumatic experiences and that, sometimes, that can be delivered only over a longer period than is currently provided for. That is why I indicated through the draft 2021-22 modern slavery strategy my intention to scope extended support arrangements within Northern Ireland.

I have also indicated through the draft strategy my intention to examine further some issues that it was not deemed appropriate to include in our Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act of 2015, to which Members referred.

Those include the “duty to notify” provisions and slavery and trafficking risk orders. A further review of those issues will allow us to take account of evidence and experience from other jurisdictions, as we decide how best to proceed in Northern Ireland. They were not originally taken forward, due to some concerns with regard to human rights; however, we now have the benefit of the experience of other jurisdictions to help to inform a review of that position.

I have also indicated that I will take forward a review of the effectiveness of section 22. Further, I have committed to working in partnership with relevant Departments to engage with the public- and private-sector organisations that will be impacted by the proposed changes to transparency in supply chains. For any of those policy developments that require legislative change, I will obviously engage with the Justice Committee and revert to the Assembly, as appropriate.

I have touched on only some of the work that is being undertaken to ensure that we are equipped to eradicate modern slavery from Northern Ireland. It is important work, to which I have given priority, and work that has been recognised and commended by national and international rapporteurs. However, we cannot and should not be complacent, and the future policy developments that I have outlined should serve to underline that I and my Department, as well as the many others with whom we work to tackle modern slavery and human trafficking, are not complacent. We also need to listen carefully to the voices of victims as we develop our responses, and a move to a longer-term strategy locally will allow us to do that more meaningfully.

The second half of the motion calls on the UK Parliament to pass the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill. While I am supportive of the sentiment behind the proposals in the Bill around support for victims, it is only in its early stages and we need to understand more about the implications of those proposals as they are taken forward. However, some of what is proposed in that Bill is already in place here. We currently provide assistance and support from the point at which a referral is made, or is about to be made, up to the point at which a reasonable grounds decision is made, and we continue to provide support until a conclusive grounds decision is reached, which can take up to a year, and have further discretion to extend beyond that where necessary. I have also committed to scoping the potential for extended support.

In relation to the proposals for the support of child victims, many are provided for within the established risk-assessment, care-planning and safeguarding processes that we already have. Further careful consideration will be given to the detail of the proposals in the Bill and their implications.

Finally, the Bill touches on immigration issues, and, while I personally concur with the views expressed about the need for immigration to take into account the impact of a hostile environment policy on vulnerable victims of trafficking and slavery, Members are aware that immigration issues are excepted matters. I will, therefore, ensure that my officials keep in touch with their counterparts at the Home Office to monitor the Bill's progress and will, of course, advise the Assembly if any changes emanate from it that are likely to impact in Northern Ireland.

I am encouraged by the motion and welcome the Assembly's commitment to raising awareness of Anti-Slavery Day and the realities of modern slavery. It is important that we take every opportunity to reinforce our collective commitment to ending all forms of modern slavery and to ensure that Northern Ireland is, and is recognised as, a society where those gross violations of human rights are not tolerated, criminals are pursued and prevented from causing further harm, and victims are protected.

The Department unreservedly commends its non-statutory partners for the excellent work that they do, both in support of victims and in awareness-raising. As Minister of Justice, I am committed to continuing to support and invest in those collaborative efforts to equip Northern Ireland to eradicate modern slavery and human trafficking.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Paul Givan to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Givan: I apologise for missing my colleagues introducing the motion and for missing some of the earlier contributions that Members made. However, I am pleased with Members' speeches and the unanimity that exists in tackling this heinous crime. We look towards the weekend and marking Anti-Slavery Day, and it was right that the motion was tabled. My colleagues from East Belfast and North Down were particularly keen to have this debated in advance of the coming weekend. I thank them for their commitment on the issue.

1.00 pm

Some colleagues mentioned things that happened in the past. Ms Sheerin talked about the British imperialist state and the stain of slavery that there is on that time. She is right: it was an appalling period of history. That can be replicated across many areas. I think about women in the Republic of Ireland having their children forcibly removed and being forced into domestic servitude in religious orders. We can all look to appalling situations that took place in different countries. I am thankful, however, for the people in all those countries who raised the banner, fought the fight and championed the cause. I think of William Wilberforce, who raised the issue of slavery in Parliament month after month and successfully campaigned for its abolition across the empire. I think about what drove him to do that. It was his Christian faith and his view that every human being has an intrinsic human value, because we are all made in the image of God. That applies to every one of us in the Chamber and across the world. I am therefore thankful for people who have championed those issues and fought for people's liberation.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He makes a valid point. While slavery has been a stain on the history of every nation, it was the Royal Navy that worked so hard to end slavery in the traditional sense at that time. If it had not been for the Royal Navy and the British Empire, slavery might not have ended then. Of course, every nation, including Ireland, has had its run-ins with slavery. Ireland was a big market for slavery, the slavery of Britons and Picts.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his intervention. He makes the point that people then wanted to make changes and changes were made.

That takes me to the modern period. Members touched on the incredible work done by Lord Morrow. I had the privilege of chairing the Justice Committee when the 2015 Act came into being. I saw the effort and the work that he put in. He had to convince people, even some in the Chamber, about parts of his Bill. He worked alongside everybody and with the Department of Justice and its officials at the time. We produced legislation that Members have rightly referred to as the most comprehensive on these islands, and it paved the way for others to follow. The House can be proud of that.

Lord Morrow worked alongside people such as Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, a Sinn Féin member in Donegal, who championed the issues in the Dáil and the Seanad and, indeed, was very helpful in persuading some of his Northern colleagues to get onside with some of the clauses in the Bill. We can look back a long time to people who raised the issues, and we can look to people who have championed them in modern times, and we are thankful for them.

Importantly, we need to think most of all about the victims. Members have talked at length about the appalling situations that victims of this crime face. Doug Beattie spoke passionately about an experience that has definitely left its mark on him. He brought it home that this is not just an international thing that happens beyond our shores. An international network brings it to these shores, and there are people in this country who actively seek the services of people who are forced into prostitution, domestic servitude and forced labour. That then means that an effective approach has to be taken by our law enforcement agencies and, indeed, by the public.

Kellie Armstrong, Robin Newton and others spoke about the need for personal choices, personal awareness and personal responsibility: how right they are. Where do the clothes that we wear and the things that we buy come from and who made them? We need to be more informed about all of that. When we see suspicious activity and we think, "It doesn't seem right, that individual being there or the way they look. There must be something wrong", do we just walk on, or do we report it to the police? Actions need to be taken.

When I think about the 108 human trafficking and exploitation cases in the past three years, with potentially 171 victims, it leads me to ask why only nine individuals have been prosecuted and only four convictions secured. Gordon Dunne talked about the need for the PPS to have clear guidance on the issue, and he is right. This is, at times, a complex crime that has an international dimension to it, but we need to see more effort being made.

I do not doubt for one minute the sincerity of the police and the Public Prosecution Service. In fact, I know from speaking to them that they have a very real and genuine desire to tackle this crime, but the relatively low rate of prosecutions and, then, convictions for those types of offences should cause us concern.

As we conclude the debate, it is right that Members have spoken passionately. The debate has recognised the seriousness of the motion but also the collective purpose behind it. We are saying to the Minister, who we know shares the same concerns, that we want to see things such as slavery and trafficking risk orders and greater support beyond the National Referral Mechanism period.

We want the view of the Assembly to be conveyed to the Home Office, which has responsibility for immigration laws. It is not a devolved matter, but it is having an impact on how we treat the victims. With one voice, let it go out collectively that this crime is something that we abhor and that we want to see properly and effectively tackled.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes Anti-Slavery Day 2020, which seeks to raise awareness of human trafficking today; condemns the crime of human trafficking, which tragically happens in our society; welcomes the progress Northern Ireland has made, with the passage of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, and the work of the Department of Justice, statutory agencies, the PSNI and civil society organisations; calls for consideration of further support for victims of trafficking beyond the end of the support provided under the National Referral Mechanism (NRM); and calls on the UK Parliament to pass the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill [HL] 2019-21, which would give confirmed victims of trafficking who find themselves in Northern Ireland leave to remain for 12 months following the National Referral Mechanism so that they can receive the support they need to recover from their ordeal, and to make it possible for them to think about giving evidence against their traffickers in court, something that is essential to reverse the low conviction rates for traffickers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we suspend proceedings, the schedule has moved around quite a bit today, so I inform Members that when we resume at 2:00 pm, the first item of business will be a public petition from Mr Colin McGrath, after which, because of the issues with Question Time, we will move to private Member's business, which is the motion on onshore petroleum licensing and drilling. That will happen pretty rapidly after the public petition, which will not take long.

The Business Committee has agreed to meet shortly after 1:00 pm. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2:00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.07 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Assembly Business

Public Petition: Restoration of the Emergency Department at Downe Hospital

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Colin McGrath has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Mr McGrath: I present the petition on behalf of the people of South Down regarding the downgrading of our emergency department at the Downe Hospital.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust took a decision at the beginning of the COVID period to reduce services at Downe Hospital, with no changes planned at the Lagan Valley or Ulster hospitals. That was totally unfair on the rural population from my area. The decision was taken without consultation with elected representatives, trade unions or the local population that would be affected. The decision was, allegedly, taken in response to a lack of staffing cover. Many would suggest, however, that staff are being taken from Downe Hospital and sent to cover staff gaps in facilities in Dundonald and Lisburn. That seems unfair on the people of the Down area.

We were promised in July that we would have our full emergency department reinstated on 19 October — next Monday. Last Monday, however, we were told that we would not now have those services reinstated, not because of COVID but, once again, because of staff shortages. Again, I ask, “Shortages where?”. Why should the people of Down and Mourne lose out because other places cannot keep their staff?

The scariest part of this is that there are no new or additional resources planned for the Ambulance Service as a result of the decision. We, in the rural population, are left with the same ambulance coverage after the decision as before, only now with no emergency department at the Downe. Thus there are longer journeys by ambulance to take people to Belfast or Dundonald.

This is a ludicrous and dangerous decision, and we should not be exposed to such risk. With Daisy Hill Hospital also having been without an emergency department for the past number of months, the community of mid- and south Down feels vulnerable, frightened and left behind.

It is proposed that our emergency department be replaced with an urgent care centre. Some might say that that is enough, but what is “urgent care”? What is an “urgent care centre”? Unfathomably, it is to be by appointment only, so why is it that, if you live in the rural areas of Down and Mourne, you are allowed to have a heart attack or a stroke only by appointment? What sort of shoddy healthcare planning is that?

The signatures — we had 7,000 views, 1,600 shares and 2,000 signatures from a Facebook page with 10,000 followers — were gathered in just a few days, completed online due to COVID restrictions and gathered while I was self-isolating. They are just the tip of the iceberg of anger

in my community. I call on the Speaker to refer the matter to the Health Committee and the Health Minister for urgent reversal.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It would be custom and practice to invite the Member to bring his petition forward to the Table to present it to me. However, in light of social distancing, I ask the Member to remain in his place, and I will make the arrangements for him to deliver the petition to the Office of the Speaker.

I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once it is received, I will ensure that it is forwarded to the Minister of Health and cc'd to the Committee.

Private Members' Business

Onshore Petroleum Licensing and Drilling

Miss Woods: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the moratoria, in various forms, on fracking in England, Scotland and Wales and the ban on fracking in the Republic of Ireland; notes that this motion builds on the 2015 strategic planning policy statement presumption against the exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbon extraction in Northern Ireland; acknowledges its responsibility to protect public health and the environment; and calls on the Executive to instigate an immediate moratorium on petroleum licensing for all exploration for, drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbons until legislation is brought forward that bans all exploration for, drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbons in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Miss Woods: From the outset, my sincere thanks must go to the groups and campaigners who have worked tirelessly on this and without whom we would not be standing here today. Non-exhaustively, they are Stop the Drill, Letterbreen and Mullaghduin Partnership (LAMP) Fermanagh, Fermanagh Fracking Awareness Network, Protect Our North Coast, Belcoo Frack Free, Friends of Woodburn Forest, Ballinlea Residents' Group, Love Leitrim, Safety Before LNG, Friends of the Earth and Farmers for Action. This is not the voice of one constituent; this is the voice of thousands, all saying that we must not start an onshore petroleum production industry here and that we need to legislate for the cessation of licensing for exploration and extraction.

I thank the Members who signed the motion as we attempted to achieve consensus across the Chamber and Sinn Féin for bringing it to be heard so soon after it was tabled. It is vital that it be debated now. It is disappointing that not every party could sign up to it, as that would have sent out a powerful message. It was not to be.

Hydrocarbon extraction in all its guises and names is a process by which fossil fuels are extracted from under the ground. Those are processes that we do not wish to have in Northern Ireland, nor do we wish to continue with any drilling of exploratory wells — we are talking not about one well but, potentially, thousands — under licence by the Executive to fundamentally destroy our landscape, our community and our environment.

In 2014, Tamboran, one of the companies that have a petroleum licence in for consideration in our Economy Department, stated that it was:

“undertaking work it is required to do under the terms of the licence from government and intends to meet its obligations in full.”

It said that it believes that people:

“have a right to know if the gas is present.”

Tamboran suggested potential benefits that that can have for investment, jobs and, bizarrely, energy security. That argument is full of holes. It was an argument also made by the previous Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister, Arlene Foster when she said:

“I firmly believe that Northern Ireland needs to explore the potential that shale gas offers ... Shale gas provides a valuable opportunity for increasing the security of energy supply” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 69, p238, cols 1 and 2].

Members, beware of chasing the carrot being dangled in front of your nose. This is nothing more than a false promise. Drilling for fossil fuels is not the way to achieve energy security; renewables are. It is a practice that will mean that we will never come close to meeting our Paris commitments or the need for divestment, let alone dealing with the climate emergency or, indeed, the elusive New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments.

Licences of any kind granted to companies will not create the kind of jobs for the future that the people of NI need. As we have seen in the US, job creation from drilling claims are overstated and short term. We all know and have debated recently the importance of well-paid, long-term jobs for people in Northern Ireland. Drilling operations will not supply those. According to Amec, only 17% of the jobs at Cuadrilla's Lancashire site went to local people, and those were mainly non-specialist jobs and, therefore, in non-highly paid sectors.

If we want both energy security and sustainable jobs in NI, we need to focus on renewable energy. Jobs in the renewable sectors create over six times as many jobs as gas per unit of power generated or saved and around three times as many jobs for the same investment.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will.

Mr Allister: The Member speaks of ensuring that there is local benefit. In light of her lauding of renewable energy, does the Member have any comment on yesterday's Audit Office report, which demonstrated that the big financial winners were financial institutions subsidised by local funds from local consumers going into their coffers, courtesy of a renewable energy scheme?

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do, but the renewable sector will work when it is administered properly.

If we want both energy security and jobs for Northern Ireland, we will need the same investment in renewable energy. Projecting to 2030, we need double the renewables capacity to meet a 70% renewable energy target. These would be sustainable jobs, with upskilling through our technical colleges, schools and universities. I have mentioned before the opportunity for retrofitting focusing on green energy and the avenues that that opens up as part of our just transition to a low-carbon economy.

We have all been told in the last few months to listen to the science on public health, and we have taken heed. As policymakers, legislators and elected reps, we should always strive for safe, happy and healthy communities. Hydrocarbon extraction is not the way to achieve that. Exploration and extraction are bad for public health. The drilling and fracturing processes that are used to extract

use a range of chemicals that are harmful to health while mobilising toxic and radioactive substances that naturally occur in shale, rock and coal. A 2016 Yale study found that, of the 1,117 water pollutants and 143 air pollutants found in fracking fluids and waste water that had been assessed, 55 could be classed as known, probable or possible human carcinogens.

All Members received a briefing from Dr O'Dolan, and I hope that they read it. Airborne chemicals can leak from pipes, well heads and other infrastructure. We have to look at radon and its presence in Fermanagh. There is no evidence that fracking can operate without threatening public health directly.

Friends of the Earth has shown that the industry brings with it wider changes that can detrimentally impact on health. Around well pads, workers and nearby residents are exposed to continual noise from drilling, flaring and compressor stations. Exposure to noise pollution is linked to cardiovascular disease, cognitive impairment and sleep disturbance, not to mention the impact that it has on air quality and pollution. There are concerns about the mental health and well-being of people who live close to gas operations. A large part of the reason that fracking was banned in New York State was that there were significant gaps in the knowledge about potential public health impacts, and all potential impacts had not been adequately studied.

I do not have time to go into the impacts on tourism that the thousands of wells could have, but it should be obvious. Fermanagh alone boasts many nature reserves and areas of special scientific interest, not to mention the Marble Arch Caves. All that could be put at risk.

As the motion states, hydraulic fracturing has been legislated against in the Republic of Ireland since 2017. The Welsh Government have confirmed that they will not undertake any new licensing, and, in Scotland, the Government's position is that they will not support the development of unconventional oil and gas. In 2019, fracking was halted by the Government in England. Andrea Leadsom, a former Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Secretary, said that the Government had always been clear that shale gas exploration in the UK must be carried out safely. However, she concluded that future unacceptable impacts on the local community could not be ruled out, and a moratorium on fracking in England was introduced. It is time for Northern Ireland to follow suit with more than a presumption. The industry cannot be regulated safely. There is nothing unique about Northern Ireland that will exempt us from the fate of other fracked communities or communities that are suffering from the dirty effects of coal seam gas production. Northern Ireland is too small to support a gas industry with hundreds of well pads. We simply do not have the space for this type of dangerous industry without threatening people's lives and livelihoods.

The entire petroleum-licensing regime is flawed. The absence of meaningful consultation under the 1964 Petroleum Act, the failure to uphold the rights enshrined in the Aarhus convention, the absence of strategic environmental impact assessments and the absence of management plans for special areas of conservation (SACs) and other protected areas mean that there are no ecological baselines for the assessment of environmental impacts with the scientific certainty that is a legal

requirement under the habitats directive. The Minister for the Economy claimed yesterday that our laws are seriously out of date.

To finish, in the words of a former envoy for climate change at the UK Foreign Office:

"You can be in favour of fixing the climate. Or you can be in favour of exploiting shale gas. But you can't be in favour of both at the same time".

The Executive must legislate to that effect as a matter of urgency. I commend the motion.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Members who tabled the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak to it.

The Economy Committee received a briefing earlier this year from the Minister and the Department, outlining some of their priorities for the remainder of this mandate. The Minister was very clear at that time that clean energy would be one of the highest priorities on the Department's agenda. Of course, as an Economy Committee member, it is evident that that has been the case from a climate change and an economic perspective.

We should all be focusing on a clean green recovery. The Minister continues to champion that clean green recovery and clean energy. All Ministers and Departments have a responsibility to deliver on those aims. The New Decade, New Approach touched on that, and we must continue to focus on it.

2.15 pm

I also note that work is continuing at pace to develop a new energy strategy for Northern Ireland following an earlier call for evidence. Five working groups have been established on the areas of consumers, energy efficiency, heat, power and transport. The groups will provide evidence, and the Department will carry out analysis of that evidence, and that will inform options for consideration by Ministers and the wider Executive. An expert panel on the future of energy has also been established to advise on the development and first implementation phase.

Through our work on the Economy Committee, we are aware that it is hoped that an options paper on the energy strategy will be published for consultation by the end of March 2021. In the meantime, I very much welcome some of the urgent policy decisions that have already been taken, particularly the Minister's recent announcement of a new target of at least 70% renewable electricity by 2030. It is also welcome that the Department is working on a range of projects that will showcase Northern Ireland's potential to develop cutting-edge hydrogen technology in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has led the way in developing renewable electricity to meet the Executive's 40% renewables target, with 48% of our power now coming from indigenous renewable sources. That success has helped to support a low-carbon renewable energy economy made up of 3,500 businesses, 5,400 jobs and over a quarter of a million of exports, but that is a fraction of the size that it could be. There is a substantial economic recovery opportunity in decarbonising energy, growing the green economy across Northern Ireland and delivering significant export opportunities for home-made lower- and zero-carbon solutions.

Ms Dolan: I will start my remarks by quoting two individuals who, going by their remarks over the years, care deeply about climate change and the future of our planet. The first is:

“Global warming, climate change, the devastating loss of biodiversity are the greatest threats that humanity has ever faced and one largely of our own creation.”

The second is:

“Today’s ecological crisis, especially climate change, threatens the very future of the human family, and this is no exaggeration.”

One quote is from Pope Francis; the other from Charles Windsor. If they can agree on the threat facing us from climate change, it should be easy for all of us to agree to this motion. Indeed, as evidenced by all who signed the motion, it is pretty clear that most of us recognise the threat posed to us all and what the way forward should be. Hydrocarbons, fossil fuels and oil and gas — whatever term you wish to use — are a clear and present threat to human health, to biodiversity, to humanity itself and to our planet’s very future.

One of the simplest answers to that threat is to keep fossil fuels in the ground. As an Assembly and a society, we must consign oil and gas to the dustbin of history. We must look to renewable energy today, focus on renewable energy today and support renewable energy today; not push it into the next mandate or into the next year. The first step in fully supporting renewable energy is supporting this moratorium on issuing petroleum licences and then introducing legislation to ban all hydrocarbon exploration and extraction.

I will now speak briefly about my county of Fermanagh. For too long, the threat of fracking has hung over our community in Fermanagh. Multiple studies have linked fracking to not only air and water pollution, soil contamination and the creation of dangerous waste by-products but to several types of cancer, pre-term births, high-risk pregnancies, asthma, migraines, fatigue, nasal and sinus symptoms and several skin disorders. All the people on the ground, of all political persuasions and none, know that the negative impacts of fracking far outweigh the supposed benefits of the oil and gas industry rolling into our area. The farming sector, the larger agri-food sector and the tourism sector are the lifeblood of my county. The long-term damage that would be done to the health of my constituents, coupled with the devastation to the economy and the environment, can never be allowed to happen.

In 2014, without warning and with no community consultation, an oil and gas company rolled into Fermanagh and made illegal threats against Belcoo residents. That fracking company went on to take two judicial reviews against two separate Executive Ministers. Big oil and gas companies do not have the best interests of our constituents at heart and do not respect our democratic institutions. That is why I urge all parties to fully support the motion.

Mr McGlone: As one of the co-signatories to the motion, I welcome, on behalf of the SDLP, the motion and the debate. It is an opportunity for the Assembly to make it clear that the environment can no longer be treated as a second-class consideration.

In the continued absence of a climate change Bill, it is up to the Assembly to highlight the steps that we must take to safeguard the environment for future generations. As the future is one with a decarbonised energy system, now is the time to demonstrate our commitment to that greener and cleaner future.

It is right that the motion calls for action from the Executive as a whole, because this is a cross-cutting issue that goes beyond the licensing remit of the Department for the Economy. Short-term economic interests cannot be allowed to trump the long-term concerns about the impact on public health or the environment. As we know, like some political parties, the companies that are seeking these licences frequently overpromise and under-deliver. It should not just be about the immediate environmental impact that is caused by extraction; the long-term impact on our climate from the continued use of hydrocarbons is now centre stage, which is where it should be. That impact must be a major part of our policy decisions.

As the motion notes, the 2015 strategic planning policy statement set out a policy of the:

“presumption against the exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbon extraction”

because of its potential environmental impact. As welcome as that was, it is time for the Assembly to accept the reality of that environmental impact and to step beyond the presumption of 2015.

The evidence has been considered by Administrations across these islands, and they have reached the same conclusion, which is that the onshore extraction of hydrocarbons is not safe. It has a detrimental impact on the local environment and undermines efforts to reduce the use of hydrocarbons as a local and global energy source.

In July 2017, the Irish Government banned the:

“Exploration for and exploration of onshore petroleum by means of hydraulic fracturing”.

The Scottish Government introduced:

“A moratorium on onshore unconventional oil and gas”

extraction in 2015. Last year, they finalised a policy position, which was:

“of no support for unconventional oil and gas”

extraction in Scotland. The Welsh Government confirmed in December 2018 that they would not support fracking for petroleum in Wales and, significantly, that they would not “undertake any new petroleum licensing.”

In November 2019, the British Government finally accepted the scientific evidence that shale gas exploration could not be carried out safely, and they brought in an immediate moratorium on fracking in England. All those Administrations have recognised that the regulation of the activities of the companies that are involved in this practice is not sufficient, but we can and should do more.

The Assembly must step up and call on the Executive to put in place an immediate moratorium on all onshore petroleum licensing. Legislation must be brought forward to ban all exploration for the drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbons in Northern Ireland. Here in the North,

just as they are across the world, our young people are demanding a climate reset. By accepting the motion, we will let our young people know that we are listening to them and that we are committed to a greener and cleaner future for them and for all. I support the motion.

Mrs Barton: I am participating in the debate as a person who lives, I believe, in one of the most beautiful constituencies of Northern Ireland, part of which, County Fermanagh, has been under threat for some time from the exploitation of gas by the fracking method. If a licence for that had been granted, it had the potential to destroy the health of the people and the beauty and economy of the area.

As the United Kingdom is committed through its Climate Change Act 2008 and the Paris agreement to limit its warming to below 2°C while aiming for 0°C by 2050, over the past few years we in Northern Ireland have made a concerted effort to support that Act by looking at alternative sources of energy and encouraging the use of sustainable materials with a shift away from, for example, our one-use plastics. Therefore, I see the motion as extremely important. We must continue our work towards protecting our environment and, even more importantly, protecting public health. In doing so, we must reject anything that would negate our efforts so far towards improving our environment and would destroy our air and water quality, which would have a profound effect on our health.

In response to a question for written answer from me, the Minister for the Economy confirmed that there are no active petroleum licences in Northern Ireland for exploitation, drilling and extraction. It gives no guarantees about the fact that, in the near future, there may be applications for such a licence or even applications already waiting to be processed. If a licence is granted, it entitles the holder to undertake exploitation, drilling and extraction processes, subject to the regulatory permissions, for a period of not one year but up to 30 years. Yes, there is an expectation that licence holders should review the potential of resources when evaluating the overall prospect of their licence. Who is going to check that?

The argument about the economy suffering if a moratorium was granted on petroleum licences does not hold. In Fermanagh, which has some of the most beautiful areas of karst scenery, it would be totally destroyed. At present, our tourism industry flourishes in parallel with our agricultural industry and the limited manufacturing companies in the area. All of those combine to retain our natural countryside in the county and collectively contribute to the county's economy. The damage to health that extraction can cause has been well documented over the years, from different lung problems because of the unclean air to a number of medical problems associated with drinking contaminated water. At the moment, we all know the importance of good health and sacrifices that we make to stay healthy and protect ourselves.

I ask that further consideration and thought be given to the consequences of granting permission for petroleum licences. The health of those living near to prospective drilling sites for petroleum exploration and production cannot and must not be sacrificed for the sake of our economy. We support the motion.

Mr Blair: I welcome Minister Mallon's recent plans to extend the planning permission requirement to cover exploration for oil and gas, including fracking. It is a welcome announcement and, in my opinion, a critical step towards the cessation of petroleum exploration and the detrimental associated environmental impacts that it causes. Like the proposer of the motion, I thank the campaigners who have kept us informed and involved.

Speaking on behalf of Alliance, I say that we are at a crucial juncture. The decisions that we make today and the actions that we take will determine whether we succeed or fail at preventing the worst impacts of climate change and the further devastation brought by that. Scientific assessments of the carbon contained in existing fossil fuel reserves suggest that full exploitation of those resources is incompatible with the agreed target of no more than 2°C of global warming. The unrestricted extraction of those reserves and continuing to issue petroleum licences in Northern Ireland, or elsewhere, undermines attempts to limit greenhouse gas emissions and would be counter to these imperatives. By ceasing to issue petroleum licences in Northern Ireland, we can contribute towards our climate change obligations and prevent any further damage or risks associated with drilling exploration wells, unconventional hydrocarbon exploration and, of course, fracking.

The big picture is climate change, but fracking is harmful not only to our climate. The environmental concerns also risk detrimental health issues. There is growing evidence of a variety of health problems associated with air pollution and water pollution caused by fracking. Multiple public health risks have emerged in research associated with petroleum exploration and production, including increases in certain cancers, asthmatic conditions, neurological problems and low birth weight amongst those living in communities that neighbour drill sites. Those issues, at the very least, deserve further exploration, examination and, of course, a moratorium.

The correlation is simply too strong to ignore, especially when we have cleaner and renewable energy options easily available to us.

2.30 pm

For our safety and that of future generations, we should not allow the new Administration in the Assembly to sell off public lands or allow drilling on our island, and we should ban fracking completely. We urgently need to legislate for the cessation of petroleum licensing for exploration and extraction. Until that can happen, it is imperative that a moratorium on fracking be imposed. Today, we can join counterparts in the UK and Ireland in calling for a date for a moratorium on the exploration and development of new reserves. We can promote the widespread roll-out of renewable energy, decrease the consumption of fossil fuels and mitigate the devastating impacts of climate change. If we mean the recently publicly expressed sentiment and intent to build back better and have a green recovery, we cannot in any convincing or sincere way also realistically talk about further fossil fuel exploration. Green recovery requires 21st-century solutions to modern-day needs. I support the motion and urge others to do so.

Mr Lynch: As the third Fermanagh Member to speak, I welcome the debate and support the motion. Never before have the issues of climate change and fossil fuels been so

crucial. In a recent documentary that many Members may have seen, David Attenborough said:

"The time for action is now. Unless we act, we may reach the point of no recovery."

We have all seen the huge floods and fires across the globe in recent times. Last week, it was confirmed that September gone was the warmest on record recently: 0.05°C hotter than last September. Scientists say that that is a clear indication of temperatures being driven by emissions from human activity.

The motion mentions the ban on fracking in the South of Ireland. That was passed into law two years ago and was welcomed by communities across the country where fracking had been mooted, including in counties surrounding my native Fermanagh such as Cavan, Leitrim and Donegal. As we know, fracking is a controversial method of extracting shale gas in which chemicals, water and sand are released at high pressure into the rock to break it up and release the gas. The practice has been linked to various environmentally damaging outcomes, including air and water pollution, soil contamination and even earthquakes. A five-year study published by Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2017 found that fracking had the potential to damage the environment and human health.

Sinn Féin's aim is to phase out fossil fuels and create a greener and more self-sufficient island when it comes to energy. A ban on fracking in the South while continuing a policy in the North would not make any sense, particularly in Fermanagh, where fracking has been a huge issue in the past number of years, as a number of Members mentioned. The region has the same rock formation and water sources as reach down through Cavan and Leitrim. That water flows as far as the Shannon estuary. The region is also one of immense natural beauty. It forms part of a geopark recognised by UNESCO that includes Cavan Burren park, the River Shannon pot, the world-famous Marble Arch caves and now the popular Cuilcagh walk, better known to people today as the "Stairway to heaven". If fracking were to be allowed there, as well as the dangers previously outlined, it would impact massively on agriculture and tourism in the area, as others have said. Never has there been a greater need to decrease carbon emissions dramatically in order to prevent climate breakdown and further intensification of the climate crisis that we are experiencing. If that means large quantities of fossil fuels remaining in the ground, so be it.

Given the Assembly's recent declaration of a climate change emergency, I have initiated a private Member's Bill (PMB) to ban fracking. The Bill's purpose and policy objective is to halt the issuing of any further licences from the Minister for the Economy for the exploration, extraction and production of fuels extracted by hydraulic fracturing. The PMB will go out to consultation in the near future, and I hope to secure as much support as possible across the Chamber. I look forward to engaging with the stakeholders who have been campaigning on the issue for years.

The Department for the Economy now issues the licences. As of February 2020, two applications are being considered, covering the areas around the Lough Neagh basin and almost the entire county of Fermanagh. In a recent response to my colleague Caoimhe Archibald, Minister Dodds rejected calls for a moratorium on

petroleum licences because there was no legislative scope for it. There is therefore a need for legislation in that regard. The Minister has advocated another review and further research into the operations and the impact of the licences. The climate science is clear, as is international scientific opinion on the impact of further exploration and extraction of fossil fuels. Other countries have already acted to ban fracking. We are in not only a climate crisis but a climate countdown, and we have little time to lose.

Ms McLaughlin: First, I pay tribute to the multitude of environmental campaigners whose drive and determination have pushed the issue to the fore. I recently met the Stop the Drill campaigners, and I share their concerns that fracking is a danger to the climate, to the environment and to public health. I am proud of the SDLP's strong record on the issue. As Environment Minister, my party colleague Mark H Durkan introduced a moratorium on fracking until scientific evidence demonstrates that it can be carried out safely without risk to the environment or to public health. No such evidence exists; instead, we have a wealth of evidence that serves as a stark warning of the dangers that fracking poses. In 2011, we saw how fracking in Blackpool caused two separate earthquakes. Further from home, we have observed confirmed cases of drinking water contamination from fracking in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and Texas. Research has also linked air pollution from fracking to a long list of health issues, ranging from respiratory illness and central nervous system damage to birth defects, cancer and premature death. Not only that, but one of the main pollutants released in the fracking process is methane, a major greenhouse gas. Over 100 years, methane has heat-trapping power about 30 times greater than CO₂. No wonder that methane has been dubbed "CO₂ on steroids".

The evidence is clear. The damage caused to our environment and our communities would be irreversible. I am pleased that Infrastructure Minister Nichola Mallon's new plans to remove permitted development rights for oil and gas will place more power into the hands of communities, ensuring that they have the right to participate in any planning decisions regarding future petroleum exploration. The Assembly can and must go further by introducing legislation that bans all exploration for, drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbons in Northern Ireland.

Now is the time to accelerate the growth of our renewable sector and build a more affordable, clean and secure energy that creates a legacy of well-paid jobs. The North is well placed to harness the potential of hydro, wave and tidal energy resources. Instead, the Department for the Economy has decided to waste £75,000 of taxpayers' money on a research project on the potential economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production of unconventional oil and gas. Let us be fair: the Department has a proven track record of wasting millions of pounds of taxpayers' money in the energy sector. Given the environmental challenges that we face, it is surely crystal clear by now that we must move away from our dependence on fossil fuels. We do not need to spend thousands of pounds to find that out. I support the motion.

Mr Dickson: I also support the motion and commend Ms Woods and my Alliance colleagues for bringing it to the Chamber today.

A few years ago, the people of Carrickfergus in my East Antrim constituency faced the prospect of oil exploration at Woodburn Forest in the hills above the town. Local opposition was particularly strong, but exploration went ahead. It was, perhaps, one of the biggest issues in the Carrickfergus area, supported by many environmental activists. The key concern was how close the site was to the Woodburn reservoirs and the potential for the contamination of drinking water for the greater Belfast area. Unfortunately, at the moment, we have a similar threat to our environment in east Antrim with an application to store gas under Larne lough. A multitude of assurances were given at the time, but, as we have seen in other countries where companies provide those assurances, the reality is very different. Ultimately, it is money, not the local community, that drives the business. Fortunately for the town and for Northern Ireland, no oil or gas was discovered, and the prospectors left, but what happened to the thousands of trees that were planted as a planning requirement to restore the area? They subsequently died, leaving the area barren. Furthermore, if oil had been found, I have no doubt that a full application for drilling would have been made and would have put the local environment in peril. It is for that reason and many others that I welcome the Infrastructure Minister's announcement that exploration will now be subject to planning permission, putting a check at the very start of the process. The public need to have confidence that a strict process is in place.

Some people seem to be under the impression that oil exploration would flood Northern Ireland with investments and wealth, just like the TV show 'Dallas'. I am sure that our Minister for the Economy would not wish to be portrayed as a J R Ewing or a Sue Ellen. That is a very dated perception. Fossil fuels have had their day, and they are the fuels of the past. The Economy Minister is working on an energy strategy. She has indicated that she would expect at least 70% of our electricity to be renewably generated.

What I believe to have precipitated this debate is a move by the Economy Minister to commission research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production in Northern Ireland. Many in the Chamber will have been contacted by concerned and distressed residents in County Fermanagh. Many believe that this is a precursor to proceeding with fracking in the area by producing research that promotes exploration and may make it more difficult to turn down future applications. The Minister, regardless of her research, needs to stop this. She needs to look properly at what the implications are and could be and at how she can ensure that we do not see fracking or petroleum exploration in County Fermanagh.

There is a ban or moratorium in all other parts of the British Isles. England tried to promote the practice, but shale gas exploration led to earthquakes, amongst other concerns. It is important that we draw this to a close now, banning the practice altogether. The risks are too high for any potential benefits, not least as we move towards a post-fossil-fuel era. The Minister informed us yesterday — I take some hope from this — that the system for licensing is old and that a greener, cleaner, more sustainable economy is what

she wants for Northern Ireland. It is what, I believe, we all want for Northern Ireland. The Minister is right: that is the way forward, so let us leave fossil fuels in the ground. The future will be bright only if it is green and clean. Our energy sources will likely need to be different and involve clean generation, and I would like to hear more about other initiatives that the Department is taking with regard to them, specifically hydrogen, as I believe that a bid was put to the Executive in respect of that.

I hope that the Minister can outline how we can ban fracking and petroleum exploration, put it behind us for ever and market Northern Ireland as a green energy leader for a better, cleaner future and to assist with our economic recovery.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question Time to the Executive Office is due to start at 2.45 pm, so I ask Members to take their ease. After Question Time, this debate will resume, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Steve Aiken.

The debate stood suspended.

(*Mr Speaker in the Chair*)

2.45 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Pat Catney to ask the first question, I thank the First Minister for facilitating today's Question Time on behalf of the deputy First Minister.

No-deal Brexit: TEO Preparations

1. **Mr Catney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether a dedicated unit has been established in their Department to manage exiting from the European Union without a deal at the end of the transition period. (AQO 848/17-22)

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Following Executive agreement, the EU future relations team in the Executive Office has been coordinating readiness planning across all Departments to include an option for a non-negotiated outcome. That work builds on preparations made in the lead up to a potential no-deal exit in 2019. The Executive Office has established an interdepartmental working group on operational readiness, which meets regularly to consider cross-cutting issues and challenges. While we are preparing for a non-negotiated outcome, it is important to remember that the protocol will still apply in that scenario.

Mr Catney: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Does she share my concerns that, even if there is a deal by the end of the year, we are too far behind in implementing parts of the Northern Ireland protocol to avoid major disruption at the end of the transition period?

Mrs Foster: I hope that the Member agrees with me that the best outcome would be for an agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom so that we can move forward together. There have already been some ways of dealing with what the Member refers to. He will have noticed that, for qualifying goods going from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, the statutory instrument already accepts that whatever is freely available in Northern Ireland at the moment will be taken as qualifying goods. However, that will be revisited in July 2021. So, there is already an acknowledgement that some of these issues will not be ready in time. That is the same whether goods are coming from the Republic of Ireland through Northern Ireland into Great Britain or, indeed, from other places in the European Union into Great Britain.

Therefore, there already are some ways of dealing with the pressure that is undoubtedly there, and I welcome the fact that there is that acknowledgement because it gives some certainty to our companies. We will continue to work with our colleagues in the UK Government to try to get more clarity for our businesses because we recognise the need to provide clarity for our businesses and for our citizens.

Mr Sheehan: Will the First Minister detail the scope of the work that the operational readiness team is involved in?

Mrs Foster: As I have said to the House already, the group came into being after our Executive meeting on 15 June. It was really to provide a focus across government, recognising that there are many Departments involved in operational readiness.

The first meeting of the interdepartmental working group on operational readiness took place on 1 July 2020. Initially, it met only monthly, but now it meets fortnightly. While a non-negotiated outcome is very different from a no-deal Brexit, which Operation Yellowhammer was dealing with this time last year, similar themes and issues arise. Much of the preparatory work was undertaken for Yellowhammer. We are building on that in the event that there is a non-negotiated outcome. I very much hope that that is not the case, because I think that a non-negotiated outcome would be the worst outcome for everyone.

Mr Lyttle: Why did Sinn Féin and the DUP oppose delivery of the New Decade, New Approach commitment to establish an Ad Hoc Committee on Brexit?

Mrs Foster: We did so because we very much believe that there is a need for the Executive as a whole to discuss the issues that are in front of us. We do that every week at the Executive subcommittee. The place for scrutiny of all those matters is in the departmental Committees, whether that be the Agriculture Committee, the Economy Committee or, indeed, the Executive Office Committee. We felt, therefore, that setting up an additional level of bureaucracy was not the way in which to proceed, but instead to give scrutiny Committees their place so that they could take the matter forward.

Mr Speaker: Before we move on to the next question, I advise Members that question 6 has been withdrawn.

US Special Envoy

2. **Mr Carroll** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their meeting with the US special envoy on 29 September 2020. (AQO 849/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Junior Ministers Lyons and Kearney and I met the US special envoy, Mick Mulvaney, for a wide-ranging discussion on significant issues, including Executive priorities, current challenges and future opportunities. It included the challenges that are being faced globally and locally as we work to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. We also addressed the issues that are arising from the fast-approaching end of the Brexit transition period and the challenges that that presents. Economic recovery was also a key issue that was discussed. There was particular focus on some of our important industry sectors, such as aerospace, alternative energy and digital technologies, in which the special envoy has a keen interest. It was an important meeting to develop further our links with the United States as our biggest international investor and a key supporter of Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her answer. However, I want to say categorically that Mick Mulvaney is no friend to the vast majority of people here, North and South. He describes himself as a "right-wing nutjob". As Trump's chief of staff, he pushed for slashing healthcare and opposed anti-poverty programmes and disability benefits, not to mention defending, time and time again, Trump's deplorable racism.

At any point, did the special envoy discuss his newly created culture fund, Exegis Capital, with any of the Ministers?

Mrs Foster: No, he did not discuss that with any of the Ministers. I have to take issue with the Member's characterisation of the special envoy. Mick Mulvaney is a friend of Northern Ireland. He has been appointed to do a job. We look forward to working with him. We had wide-ranging conversations, in particular about alternative energy and the Economy Minister's desire for a hydrogen hub in Northern Ireland. We discussed that with him. It was a very useful meeting. We will have further meetings with the special envoy in due course. We look forward to him being able to assist us to get into new businesses and, indeed, new sectors to the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland.

Ms Anderson: Does the First Minister share the concerns of a number of US political figures about the implications of a no-deal Brexit for the Good Friday Agreement?

Mrs Foster: I must say to the Member that I am confident that anything that has been discussed thus far with regard to our leaving the European Union, including the Internal Market Bill at Westminster, does not constitute any threat to the Belfast Agreement. That was acknowledged by Mick Mulvaney when he was here. He made those comments when he was asked about and pushed on the Internal Market Bill. Of course, he wants us to proceed here and work together for the benefit of all the people in Northern Ireland. I am certainly committed to doing that. I hope that when we transition out of the European Union, we will continue to do the work that is necessary here in Northern Ireland. In doing so, we will, of course, work across all of the strands of the Belfast Agreement — North/South and east-west — as well as making this place operational and working for the good of everyone.

Dr Aiken: I thank the First Minister for coming today at such short notice. Did the First Minister and the deputy First Minister get the opportunity to express to the United States special envoy to Northern Ireland the importance of people in Washington reading and understanding the Belfast Agreement?

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, the deputy First Minister was unable to meet Mr Mulvaney; the two junior Ministers and I met the envoy on that occasion. I hear the Belfast Agreement — others refer to it as the Good Friday Agreement — referenced on many occasions. Sometimes, I wonder whether people have actually read the contents. The document, although not very long, is well worth rereading. I am sure that the Member is very much aware of the three strands that it contains: North/South, east-west and the totality of relationships, recognising, of course, that it is for the people of Northern Ireland to determine their future. As he well knows, the consent principle lies at the very heart of it.

Mr McNulty: It is good to hear that you had a meeting with Mick Mulvaney, First Minister. I hope that you enjoyed the craic with him and talking about his Irish roots in County Mayo. Was a minute of the meeting kept, as suggested in regard to openness and transparency under New Decade, New Approach? If so, was a minute kept of the conversation with the Chinese consul to Belfast at your meeting earlier in the year?

Mrs Foster: Yes. Minutes are kept of all meetings, as agreed in New Decade, New Approach. The minutes are kept by our officials.

Investment Strategy: Update

3. **Ms Sheerin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the investment strategy for Northern Ireland will be published. (AQO 850/17-22)

Mrs Foster: We all recognise the need to invest for the future in our infrastructure to ensure that individuals and businesses benefit from the best possible facilities and services. The investment strategy is the Executive's strategic description of how we will focus our available capital resources to address the social and economic values and outcomes set out in the Programme for Government. The current investment strategy covers the years 2011-2021. We expect that, by March 2021, over £14 billion will have been invested in infrastructure under that strategy.

The next investment strategy will be developed in parallel with the Programme for Government. It will be informed by the priorities and outcomes in the Programme for Government and by the overall expectation of public finance availability. Subject to the agreement of the Executive, it is intended that the investment strategy will be brought forward during the 2021-22 year.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the Minister outline how the Executive derive maximum social value from the money that is spent?

Mrs Foster: Yes. We do that in a number of ways. As an Executive, we take advice from the Strategic Investment Board on our strategy going forward. Prior to 2019, one of the primary ways in which Buy Social achieved social benefit through public procurement was targeted recruitment and training clauses, requiring contractors to provide a portion of the total weeks of employment on the contract to new-entrant trainees: people who did not have any substantial work experience, such as those who had just left school or college, or the long-term unemployed. That is very important. Often, I meet young people who have not succeeded at school in terms of gaining academic qualifications, and they can find it very difficult to get work experience. In this way, we can help young people to get work experience so that they have something to talk about when they apply for future jobs.

In February of this year, we expanded the scope of the scheme to include ICT contracts in Buy Social. We have not had formal approval from the Procurement Board for that expansion, but it is another way in which we can involve Buy Social in our contracts and investment strategy. We can help in a number of ways, and the Strategic Investment Board is well aware of the Executive's desire to see this make a difference to some of our young people's lives.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Minister give assurances that any investment strategy will complement and ensure a commitment to green new deal policies?

3.00 pm

Mrs Foster: Those are the sorts of things that were not involved in the investment strategy when it was first drafted, but, since then, climate change in particular has

become a huge issue for those of us who are involved in procurement. We in Northern Ireland spend a lot of government money, and it is important that climate change is part of that. I know that the Minister for Infrastructure now has a body looking at infrastructure and advising her. Hopefully, that will dovetail with the investment strategy and we will be able to take this forward. Climate change is very much part of the strategy.

Ms McLaughlin: What efforts have been made to ensure that there is subregional balance in the investment strategy? What is your understanding of regional balance?

Mrs Foster: As somebody who is from the south-west of the Province, I very much want to see regional balance in our investment strategy. If the deputy First Minister were here, she would say the same about mid-Ulster. Part of the advantage of devolution is that you have elected representatives in the Executive from right across Northern Ireland. Therefore, there is a desire to make sure that the investment strategy works for everyone in Northern Ireland. For us, that will mean better outcomes in the Programme for Government for everyone who lives here, not just those who live in urban locations or in the east or the west of the Province. Everybody needs to be taken into account, and because the investment strategy is being looked at alongside our Programme for Government, those two things will work hand in hand.

Communities in Transition: Update

4. **Ms P Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the delivery of the Communities in Transition (CIT) programme. (AQO 851/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, with your permission, junior Minister Lyons will answer this question.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): To date, delivery partners have been appointed to deliver 30 individual projects covering a variety of themes across the eight areas of focus for the project. Whilst the emergence of COVID-19 had the potential to disrupt implementation, delivery has continued throughout and good progress has been made across all projects, thanks to the commitment, creativity and enthusiasm shown by delivery partner organisations and supported by officials.

The Communities in Transition project is designed to support, empower and equip communities as we work together to tackle the scourge of paramilitarism and coercive control in eight specific geographic areas. Without strong, positive, confident and resilient communities, paramilitary organisations and other similar malign influences can occupy the space that is created, thus limiting the opportunity for positive change and progress.

The Communities in Transition project seeks to improve voice, access and agency in communities, thus narrowing the ground for other influences to exert control. A community-informed approach lies at the heart of the project, and we are committed to continuing to engage with communities throughout the delivery of the current phase of activity and beyond.

Recently, junior Minister Kearney and I had the privilege of meeting a number of community delivery partners. I was particularly struck by how those groups work together and do what they can, very successfully, to bring about

solutions at a local level. We look forward to engaging with other delivery partners over the coming months.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the junior Minister for a very fulsome answer. Will he provide details of phase 2 of the project?

Mr Lyons: As the Member will be aware, the tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime programme is due to expire in March 2021. The Executive have discussed and agreed in principle to a further phase of the tackling paramilitary programme to be delivered over a three-year period up to March 2024. The CIT project will be a significant part of the community-facing element in the next phase of the programme. Subject to confirmation of budget and an ongoing government-wide budgeting exercise, it is hoped that the CIT project will have an indicative budget of £12 million.

The interventions supported through the Communities in Transition project have been shaped and informed by communities in response to the specific issues that manifest themselves in each locality. The range of interventions continue to deliver much-needed community responses at a time when positive community leadership is needed more than ever.

We recognise the commitment and innovation that has been shown across these areas and assure our community delivery partners of our continued support for this good work. These projects must have the ability to embed at a community level. We are already seeing the impact of these interventions, and we must ensure that the necessary time is given to bring about the sustainable change and positive legacy that all our communities want to see.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sorry to rain on the parade of Communities in Transition, but my experience is somewhat different. We see a duplication of effort. In going to phase 2, how do we ensure that there is no duplication of effort and that there is some point in time when Communities in Transition has to end, 20 years post the ceasefires and the Good Friday Agreement?

Mr Lyons: If the Member has concerns about certain projects, we are happy to hear about them. I speak from my experience of hearing from delivery partners with whom we have engaged, and I received positive feedback. Where there is a need, these programmes must continue, especially if they are seeing the positive effects that we have seen in certain projects. I would be happy to have a further conversation with the Member.

Mr Beattie: The Communities in Transition programme has some great initiatives, but, like the Member on the opposite Benches, I am not seeing the outputs from what we put in. It is just not kicking out. How are we measuring the outputs, given the rise, in our constituency, of paramilitary and terrorist activity?

Mr Lyons: Obviously, there seems to be an issue in the constituency of Upper Bann. I am not sure what individual projects the Members refer to. However, as Ministers, we are always more than happy to engage with Members to see what is and is not working. There are different themes, and the CIT programme involves itself in different areas. Perhaps we need to look at them. From our point of view, we see where this is working and that there are positive impacts from it. Let us have that conversation and

make sure that we see the positive developments in that constituency that we see elsewhere.

Mr Speaker: Gerry Kelly is not in his place. We move to question 7.

Ministerial Code: Commitment

7. Mr Frew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means. (AQO 854/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The deputy First Minister and I have both affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as a condition of our appointments. The:

“commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means”

required by the pledge informs at all times how we should discharge our duties as a joint office.

Mr Frew: Given the recent comments and behaviour of Gerry Kelly MLA and, of course, the past of that party, will the First Minister take the opportunity to remind the House of the obligations on MLAs to keep to peaceful means?

Mrs Foster: The Member is right to make a distinction between Ministers and MLAs, because the Pledge of Office does not apply to MLAs who are not Ministers or junior Ministers. However, MLAs are governed by the Assembly code of conduct and must also give an undertaking, under section 40A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which includes the requirement to:

“support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and to support all efforts to uphold it”.

All of us in the Chamber, who have the huge privilege of representing people from our constituencies, need to remember that we have made that Pledge of Office and we should stick by it.

Ms Dillon: The European Court of Human Rights ruled unanimously that article 2 of the human rights convention, which guarantees the right to life, had been violated at Loughgall. Does the First Minister accept that the comments of her party colleague Paul Frew, on the anniversary of Loughgall, created great offence and hurt to grieving families and that everyone has a right to remember loved ones, regardless of your view of those who died in Loughgall?

Mrs Foster: I am not aware of the comments of the Member she refers to. I am blissfully unaware, Mr Speaker, because I do not do Twitter. I may post on Twitter, but I do not look at it. I advise Members right across the Chamber that that is a good thing to do.

Mr Allister: Does the First Minister agree that the Pledge of Office, with its undertaking to support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed, is a solemn commitment, not a flexible commitment? Does she also agree that the flagrant breach of the rule of law, insofar as the coronavirus regulations are concerned, by her deputy First Minister has not only driven a coach and horses through that pledge but, sadly, severely undermined the messaging on COVID-19?

Mrs Foster: I agree with the Member that it is a solemn commitment, and we should all think about that, given that

we took the pledge when we were elected to this place and reaffirmed it when the Assembly reconvened.

On the commentary about the deputy First Minister, as the Member knows, there is a police investigation into that event, and there is also an investigation in this place. We should wait for the outcome of those investigations.

Undoubtedly, damage has been done to the messaging on COVID-19. I regret that people are not complying in the way in which we need them to comply in order to stop the transmission of this terrible virus. I ask them to go back to basics and to adhere, please, to all the things that we talk about day and daily, such as washing your hands, keeping your distance, making sure that you wear a mask in the appropriate places and having good respiratory hygiene. All those things need to be repeated by all of us on an ongoing basis, because, at the moment, we have a very high level of COVID transmission and are in the unenviable position of part of Northern Ireland having the highest rate of transmission in the whole of the United Kingdom. That is a hugely disappointing place to be in, given our very good record during the first wave of COVID-19. People really need to get back to basics on this and try to help us work together as partners to move beyond the virus and get to a place where we can suppress its curve and make sure that we have space in our hospitals for those people who are unwell and who may need to go into intensive care.

Meenan Square Development: Update

8. Ms Mullan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the business case for the Meenan Square development in the Foyle constituency. (AQO 855/17-22)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Lyons will answer question 8.

Mr Lyons: TEO's Urban Villages initiative is currently developing the business case for that major regeneration project, which includes options for a mixed-use development that will offer a range of facilities for the benefit of the community. The project aims to reinvent the site as a shared space for fostering positive community identities, building good relations and harnessing wider economic and social benefits by reclaiming and repurposing a dilapidated site that has, for too long, been a catalyst for antisocial behaviour. The business case is being prioritised, with a view to its being completed and ready for submission to the Department of Finance for approval by the end of this calendar year.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. We understand that processes and time frames can mean that dealing with private and public partners can be very complex, but the residents, who have seen the site become dilapidated over many, many years, had an expectation that the site would be developed this year. Can the Minister give a commitment that the project is being taken forward urgently?

Mr Lyons: There are a number of stages to the development. First, as I said, the business case has to go to the Department of Finance. That will include early designs, but the final design will be subject to a full planning application and consultation. In parallel with the business case, work is ongoing to secure the purchase of the site before the end of this financial year. Once the

site is purchased, all buildings will be demolished, leaving a significant vacant, open space. Indicative funding costs are estimated to be around £5.5 million. It is a key priority in the Urban Villages capital programme, however. There is a bit of a way to go yet, so I urge the Member and her constituents to be patient.

Mr Middleton: The Minister will be aware that different Departments have previously contributed to funding for transport to Fountain Primary School. That funding is now coming to an end. Will the Minister commit to pursuing funding for transport to the school, particularly given the fact that it is an Urban Villages area?

3.15 pm

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for raising the issue. I am aware of it, and I understand the importance of maintaining that transport service for the young people who attend that school. Discussions are ongoing between the relevant Departments in order to find a solution. I will endeavour to keep the Member updated on developments.

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

COBRA: Update

T1. **Mr Lyttle** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the UK Government COBRA meeting that she attended this week. (AQT 501/17-22)

Mrs Foster: We attended the COBRA meeting this week on behalf of the Executive. The deputy First Minister, the Minister of Health, the Chief Medical Officer and I were all in attendance. At the meeting, we were given an update on the current state of play by the Joint Biosecurity Centre. It is important that we hear what is going on from an epidemiology point of view across the United Kingdom, and, of course, the Prime Minister updated us on his three-tiered approach from an English point of view hoping that, across the United Kingdom, we would have similar approaches to allow us to access funding to assist people when we may have to close down businesses or sectors. It was an important meeting, and we have to follow up on some of the issues that were raised.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the First Minister for her update. How concerned is she about the alarming increase in COVID cases in Northern Ireland, which has seen seven deaths being recorded since yesterday as well as 23 ICU admissions, 15 people on ventilators, the overwhelming of our contact tracing system and regrettably now, it appears, cancellation of elective surgery in Belfast? What decisive action will the Executive Office take to arrest that situation?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. We are collectively very concerned about the rise in transmission across Northern Ireland and the consequent daily increase in the number of hospital inpatients. I understand that, today, 150 inpatients are suffering from COVID-19 and that, as the Member rightly pointed out, 23 ICU beds are now being taken up. We are concerned about that, and we will have an Executive meeting later this afternoon to discuss the issue and what we can do as an Executive to halt the rise of COVID-19.

We have to be clear that, whilst, of course, we have to halt the rise of COVID-19 — that is something that we

are all concerned about — it is important that we take a proportionate and balanced approach. Some people have said that it is about health versus wealth, but that is a completely false analysis. Back in May, our Chief Medical Officer made the point that poverty kills and unemployment kills as well. Therefore, it is a balancing act between making sure that we deal with COVID-19 and trying to protect our economy, our society and family life as we know it. Those are huge decisions, and none of it is easy. We will come together to make those decisions later this afternoon.

Casement Park

T2. **Mr McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to assure him and all other Gaels that commitments made in New Decade, New Approach will be stood by and that funding will be made available to complete the construction of the stadium of dreams in Ulster, particularly as he and his fellow Gaels in County Antrim, Ulster, across Ireland and further afield are bouncing today and very much welcome the Infrastructure Minister's decision on Casement Park and céad míle fáilte roimh athoscailt Pháirc Mhic Easmainn. (AQT 502/17-22)

Mrs Foster: It is good to hear the Member welcoming a decision by the Minister for Infrastructure. He was not as fulsome in his praise of the last announcement that the Minister made, but it is good to see that that has been healed by the announcement today on Casement Park.

As Members will know, Casement Park was to proceed on the same basis as Ulster Rugby's Kingspan Stadium and Windsor Park for the Irish Football Association. It has taken a long time to get the planning permission in place for Casement Park. Unfortunately, it now seems that the cost has risen. Therefore, there will have to be discussions with Ulster GAA in relation to that. At the time that this was agreed, it was at a level that showed parity across the three sporting codes. We look forward to discussions with the Department for Communities around that issue. I accept that it is a stage that a lot of people have been looking forward to, and it is good to hear that the Member is back in line with the rest of his party.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, First Minister, for your answer. Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireas na daoine. We rely on each other for shelter. When Casement is completed, when our stadium of dreams is built, will you commit, if we are still in this place, to attend, alongside me and other Members, the first Ulster final to be played in Casement Park?

Mrs Foster: Of course, one always waits for the invitation to attend such events, and I look forward to that invitation, if and when it comes. Fermanagh may well be back in the final by that stage, and we look forward to that day very much.

Brexit: Update

T3. **Mr Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the cooperation between the devolved Administrations in relation to unresolved issues surrounding Brexit and the representations that the First Minister has had with Her Majesty's Government to ensure unfettered access for Northern Ireland goods across the United Kingdom. (AQT 503/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The cooperation and conversations continue apace across the devolved Administrations in relation to that. We have many meetings with the Paymaster General — the junior Ministers attend some of those — and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who leads on a lot of Brexit issues.

The formal negotiation round — the ninth — is completed. We wait to see whether any more progress can be made between the UK and the European Union. We stand ready at all times to work with our colleagues in HMG around the issues concerning Northern Ireland, and they have been very accessible in dealing with those.

Mr Robinson: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Are the Government of the Republic of Ireland cooperating in addressing the issues surrounding Brexit?

Mrs Foster: As regards our relationship with Dublin, we recognise that the Republic of Ireland is a member state of the European Union and, therefore, the negotiations continue between the EU and the UK in that respect. However, there are many things on which we have common cause — access to the GB market is one of those — in making sure that we are able to work together in the future. The Republic of Ireland being the nearest neighbour of the UK, it is important that we work together on all those issues. We will continue to do our best to get the proper and right outcome in all these matters, and we are happy to work with colleagues in Dublin as well as, of course, our sovereign Government.

Support for the Economy

T4. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what actions the First Minister is taking to support the economy, given that she referred earlier to a meeting of the Executive later today at which big decisions will be made. (AQT 504/17-22)

Mrs Foster: We were pleased to have a call with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Friday, when he announced a job support package. We recognise that it is not as generous as the furlough scheme in assisting employers to keep people in work. That scheme was 80% of their salary paid by government; this is two thirds, and it will not come on-stream until 1 November. We also welcome the £200 million of Barnett consequentials that will allow us to put together our own schemes to help industries that will need assistance and support. However, whatever the assistance and support that we can put in place, it will not be as good as people running their businesses in the normal run of things. We can only mitigate damage, and we will do our best with the funding available to us and, of course, the funding that comes from HMG.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the First Minister for her answer. With respect to the meeting later, is the First Minister content that the Executive can find a way forward that looks at the economy and health in a balanced way?

Mrs Foster: We need to recognise, as I have said, that the characterisation of “Health against wealth” is an absolutely false characterisation. If people lose their jobs or find themselves in poverty or unemployed, that can lead to really bad health outcomes. I think that Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer for the UK, said yesterday that, if we

harm the economy, we harm the long-term health of our people. People need to acknowledge that.

We sometimes get very focused on the numbers. The numbers are not good, and I am not suggesting that they are. However, when we look at the big job of work in front of us today, we have to take a balanced and proportionate approach; indeed, the legislation says that we should make a proportionate response in this difficult time in our history. I hope that we can come together, find the restrictions and put them in place, so that the community reacts to those restrictions and we can stop the spread of the virus.

Irish and Ulster-Scots Language Legislation

T5. **Mr Stewart** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the current time frame for the introduction of Irish and Ulster-Scots language legislation. (AQT 505/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, these are New Decade, New Approach commitments, as well as the third commitment on the office for culture and identity. It is important that all those issues move forward together. The Executive Office is looking at all those issues and hopes to give an indicative time frame in due course to the Committee that scrutinises the Executive Office. We would have hoped to be further on in some of our New Decade, New Approach commitments, but it should be recognised that we have had to deal with the pandemic in the meantime.

Mr Stewart: Thank you for the answer, First Minister. Has the cost of implementing the strategy been fully developed? When will it be published?

Mrs Foster: The Executive Office has been given a marker bid for the budget. We have not yet fully costed the commitments on Irish language, Ulster-Scots/British identity and the office of culture and identity. Political agreements are required to move forward on those issues. It is important, of course, that we deal with them in the most appropriate way, given the current restrictions on our financial capability. However, we recognise that they are political commitments and that, therefore, we need to take them forward in the appropriate way.

NDNA Spend

T6. **Ms Bunting** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in the light of some of yesterday’s debates, for an update on the spend to date of money from Her Majesty’s Treasury for NDNA. (AQT 506/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I do not have the exact figure for the UK Government’s commitments on NDNA, but there have been significant moves on NDNA. For example, the Veterans Commissioner has been appointed. We have extended welfare mitigations, which is a big figure. I am happy to write to the Member about that. We have progressed the Hart report on historical institutional abuse, set up a panel on tackling educational underachievement and set up the Centenary Forum and the historical reference group. The joint board from the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Executive has been set up and has met. So, a lot has happened on NDNA progress. We accept that, had it not been for COVID-19, there would have been more progress on NDNA. I will write to the Member with the UK spend to date when I have that figure.

Ms Bunting: If no further money is forthcoming from London, how will the Executive Office decide which projects should be prioritised?

Mrs Foster: That is a challenging question. 'NDNA' was a political document. It was the basis on which we all came back into the Assembly after three years outside government. It is a realistic question, because we know that there are huge challenges. As I have said before, because it is a political agreement across five parties, we cannot upset or skew it. We have to do it in a balanced way. The five parties need to decide together what the priorities are.

That is the only fair way that we can take it forward.

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

3.30 pm

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

Private Members' Business

Onshore Petroleum Licensing and Drilling

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly recognises the moratoria, in various forms, on fracking in England, Scotland and Wales and the ban on fracking in the Republic of Ireland; notes that this motion builds on the 2015 strategic planning policy statement presumption against the exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbon extraction in Northern Ireland; acknowledges its responsibility to protect public health and the environment; and calls on the Executive to instigate an immediate moratorium on petroleum licensing for all exploration for, drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbons until legislation is brought forward that bans all exploration for, drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbons in Northern Ireland. — [Miss Woods.]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members will know the time that has been allocated for the debate. There are two more Members left to speak, and there are nine minutes left. If the first Member whom I call is generous, the final Member on the list, Mr Carroll, will also be able to speak. It is up to Dr Aiken whether or not he wishes to be generous.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Of course I shall be generous. I shall try to keep my remarks to about three minutes to allow Gerry to speak. We should do that in the spirit of cooperation.

I support the motion for a very clear reason: in Northern Ireland, we do not wish to have drilling for hydrocarbons such as gas, gas fracking or petroleum. The reason for that is quite simple: we are moving away from a hydrocarbon era and into an era of renewables, smart grids and the appropriate use of new technologies to provide energy for Northern Ireland.

Bearing in mind that that is the case and that I wish to keep my remarks short, I will move on to the specific questions about what we need, rather than proposals for drilling for oil and gas in Northern Ireland. It is about what we need to do with a new energy strategy. The important point about that strategy is with some of the things to which we need to look. We need to install new smart grids. We need to conduct studies into the feasibility of offshore wind and how it can mix into the wider all-island and pan-European energy markets.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to hydrogen. For our farmers, in particular, who are looking to the future, it is important that we look at the use of biogas and hydrogen. We should consider whether our Utility Regulator is fit for purpose to allow us to inject energy from hydrogen and biogas directly into the grid.

We need to investigate the monopoly of the ESB and EirGrid or, as they are better known in Northern Ireland, NIE and the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI), and the implications for the Northern Ireland energy market, particularly with how it affects and distorts prices and pricing, and the impact on people who are trying to put renewables onto the grid. The Minister will be well aware from her predecessor, who introduced the monopoly system, that that needs to be fundamentally reviewed.

We need to consider whether we have a system that is fit for purpose and is capable of dealing with future energy policy in Northern Ireland. The key thing that we have to consider is whether Northern Ireland is too small to have its own regulation system. Among the keys to future renewable energy issues will be contracts for difference and the important decision of whether we go for a United Kingdom-wide system, using Ofgem, or look to another system. We should not try to reinvent the wheel. We seem to get it badly wrong every time we do so, whether it is for wind, RHI boilers or trying to build the incineration-to-power plants that are not needed in my constituency.

I am about to sit down to give more time to Gerry Carroll. I would like the Minister to address those points. We support the motion.

Mr Carroll: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, thank you for pointing out the time shortage. I also thank Dr Aiken for being generous with his time. I signed the motion, so, had I not been called to speak, it would have been absurd and raised all sorts of questions about how the House operates. I thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and Dr Aiken for mentioning that. Ms Sugden is also looking to get in but has not been called, so there are issues there as well.

Several months ago, the House declared a climate emergency, which was an important step on the path to, hopefully, tackling the existential climate and biodiversity issues that threaten life itself on the planet. Of course, as with many things, just because something has been debated and voted for does not automatically make it a reality. Repeatedly, in the House, we hear from Members and Ministers that we should not be working in silos and that there should be a joined-up approach to tackling a range of issues. However, I firmly believe that either the Department did not get the memo; or it did and wants to ignore it. On the one hand, we have an overwhelming desire for action in our communities to tackle the climate issues, an approach that the House endorsed; on the other hand, the Minister or Department, or both, has gone off in the opposite direction and is implementing or allowing to exist policies that could damage the environment. Not only is that a contradiction of what the House said and how it voted, but it represents a slap in the face for all those who walked out of their school or workplace as part of the climate strikes and for all the community campaigners, who, as mentioned by others, have been fighting to protect the environment. It is very worrying therefore that the Department could be, if it is not already, embarking on a path that could lead to the validation of further licence applications.

It appears that the Department has validated an application from a company that has worrying financial irregularities. As I understand it, an application from a \$2 company in the Isle of Man for a licence to explore in Fermanagh was validated. Even after the validation, the Isle of Man authorities refused to reveal who that company's beneficial owners were. Still, a licence to explore was granted. The Department tried to check with the Isle of Man authorities who the beneficial owners were only after the application had been validated, thereby breaking the 1987 and 2010 regulations. That is very concerning. It is a bit like a bank giving a mortgage to somebody without looking at their bank statements. That would not happen, so why should it happen on a

much bigger and more dangerous scale? Why should corporations be allowed to act with such impunity and with so little scrutiny of their decisions and transactions?

If this licence proceeds, there could be another expensive inquiry into a flawed and potentially dangerous system that is detrimental to the environment. Why not stop it happening now? We were told that lessons were learned from the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme. To me, that does not seem to be the case: this smacks of a transition from cash for ash to cash for gas. Those issues need to be addressed. As when RHI whistle-blowers were dismissed and their concerns brushed under the carpet, there are massive questions for the Minister in this case. She may not have this information, but it is important that she responds today or as quickly as possible. These concerns are of huge public interest.

The problems do not seem to end there. Affecting my constituency and others, there is an application — PLA1/16 — for potential drilling and extraction in an area that extends from Lough Neagh right across to west Belfast and covers multiple council areas in the North.

It is worth saying that thousands of responses, or objections, were submitted to this application by members of my community and people from other Members' communities and beyond, yet we have not heard a decision from the Department. It is worth emphasising to the Minister that, whilst we have been waiting over a year for a response to it, nothing less than binning this application would be agreeable to my constituents and, I am sure, to many others.

It is very concerning. In general terms, there is a mistaken view that granting licences of various kinds may bring jobs or some economic benefit to beleaguered communities. Licences may be granted to multinational corporations and mass polluters. We need to have a wide-ranging and imaginative campaign to create green jobs as part of a just transition, and that is even more essential given that hundreds of thousands of people will lose their jobs because of COVID and the recession. Rather than let those —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that the Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: I will bring my comments to a close. I support the motion.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion, and I value the interest that has been shown by Members in this very important and current issue.

I will provide some context on the current arrangements for petroleum licensing in Northern Ireland. Onshore exploration for petroleum in Northern Ireland has been taking place on a small scale since the Petroleum (Production) Act (Northern Ireland) was introduced in 1964. Over that time, although small amounts of oil and gas have been found, no commercial extraction has taken place. There are currently no petroleum licences in Northern Ireland. The last one, held by Terrain Energy, was relinquished on 28 April 2020. The House will, of course, be aware that my Department is considering two petroleum licensing applications, and I will talk about those in more detail later.

In the past, having the economic security of an indigenous oil or gas supply would have been welcome. My Department and its predecessors would have been strong advocates for the exploration for and exploitation of fossil fuels. However, in recent years, there has been a step change. Genuine and proven concerns about carbon emissions, global warming and the environmental impacts of petroleum extraction and use are setting a new policy context. Indeed, many in the Chamber today have recognised that evolving policy context, with references to the changes in policy in the other nations of the United Kingdom. In recognition of that clear change not only in policy objectives but in public opinion and even before the New Decade, New Approach commitment to tackle climate change head-on, a review of our approach to petroleum exploration and exploitation was needed. On that basis, my Department commenced a wide-ranging review in 2019.

I wish, for a moment or two, to return to the two petroleum licence applications that are being considered. One applicant proposes exploring for oil and gas in the porous sandstones in the area to the south-east of Lough Neagh using conventional drilling techniques. The other applicant proposes exploring for gas in County Fermanagh and initially proposed the use of high-volume hydraulic fracturing, which is also known as fracking. Both applications were subject to a public consultation process, which closed in July 2019. My Department received in excess of 5,700 responses, which were published online at the end of October last year. Following its own review of the responses received, one of the applicant companies, Tamboran Resources (UK) Ltd, made a request to the Department to revise its application. The proposed revision will remove the need for fracking, very much as a direct result of the strength of opposition to this controversial technique, which was highlighted by the respondents to the consultation process.

In summary, across Northern Ireland at this time, we have no petroleum exploration and development licences in place, and neither of the two applications that are being considered propose the application of high-volume hydraulic fracturing.

3.45 pm

The extraordinary and unprecedented number of responses to the public consultation on petroleum licensing applications is a clear sign of the change in public attitudes and demonstrates the concerns that exist around petroleum exploration. I recognise the very legitimate unease that has been raised through the consultation process and, indeed, by Members of the House directly to me. My Department is considering the issues and will do so in conjunction with the relevant experts across government and other regulatory bodies, as is required. However, the number and range of concerns that were raised in the responses to the consultation has simply underlined the lack of knowledge and evidence that we have around the issues. It has also brought into sharp focus the urgent need to review and update our petroleum licensing policy and regime to meet the needs of Northern Ireland going forward. I have previously made it quite clear that a review of the licensing policy in this area must be completed before any decision on the two current applications can be taken.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: No.

I have also given a commitment that, given the cross-cutting and controversial nature of petroleum exploration and development, it will be for the Executive to make the final decision on what our future petroleum licensing policy will be.

As I indicated, my Department has commenced a wide-ranging review of our petroleum licensing regime. The review is being undertaken in accordance with the Executive's policy development toolkit, with the aim of establishing a robust evidence base from which to develop policy options for any future petroleum licensing regime. Work began in February 2019 with a high-level review of the existing regime to assess its effectiveness and the impact on sustainability, particularly in light of the UK's net-zero carbon commitments. That included engagements with counterparts in Scotland and Wales. The outputs of the review only further highlighted the deficiency of the existing information on the Northern Ireland-specific impacts of petroleum licensing.

When taken in conjunction with the number and range of issues that were raised in the consultation on the two applications, the review also identified a need for independent research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and development in Northern Ireland. This research is designed to help to inform the evidence on which we can base our future petroleum licensing policy. My Department is working through the final stages of the procurement exercise and intends to award the contract for this project in the coming days.

There has been much speculation this afternoon in the House, and many have referred to the policy developments in England, Scotland and Wales. One thing that England, Scotland and Wales have in common in this area of policy development is that they all carried out that independent research before coming to that policy decision, just as Northern Ireland will and should do. Once the independent research is completed, the review will move into a period of intensive stakeholder engagement, with a view to developing evidence-based petroleum licensing policy proposals.

Any new policy proposal will, as and when necessary, be subject to a full environmental and regulatory impact assessment, including a strategic environmental assessment. After any proposals for a future policy have been fully developed and assessed, it will then be taken forward to a public consultation. Ultimately, the final decision on the future petroleum licensing policy for Northern Ireland will then be taken to the Executive, prior to the draft legislation coming before this House. That is my commitment to this House.

Members will also be aware that my Department is developing a new energy strategy, with consumers, businesses and domestic users as central to all of the themes of work. Many have referred to it, and I look forward to engaging with you on it. Indeed, I noted the issues that you specifically addressed, Mr Aiken, and I will write to you on those very specific issues.

The new strategy will set out a road map to 2050 to decarbonise heat, power and transport. It will substantially improve our energy efficiency and benefit energy consumers. The review of petroleum licensing policy will

therefore need to take account of the policy direction in the energy strategy. I thank Mr Dickson for reminding the House that I have said very clearly that Northern Ireland needs not just economic recovery but a green economic recovery and sustainable environmental policies that can be part of the new economy in Northern Ireland's second century.

I understand that the motion has wide support across the Chamber and that petroleum development is a very emotive subject. As Minister, I want to ensure that any decision that I recommend to the Executive on future policy is based on robust evidence and presents the best way forward for Northern Ireland as a whole.

At this stage, I cannot support the motion as presented. I have taken legal advice on the matter and have been advised that the course of action proposed in the motion would, most likely, be subject to challenge. Accordingly, my view is that the appropriate way forward is to undertake the Northern Ireland-specific research that my Department is in the process of procuring. As Minister with responsibility for this area, I am asking for the time and space to allow officials to develop evidence-based policy proposals that will be subject to a rigorous policy development process. I will then ask the Executive to take a fully informed decision.

To conclude, I thank Members for their contributions to today's debate. I assure all in the House that I and my Department remain committed to working with all key stakeholders to ensure that we continue to deliver key Programme for Government outcomes and climate change commitments in Northern Ireland. I have set out my Department's direction of travel, which will result in the Assembly and the Executive being able to deliver an evidence-based petroleum licensing policy for Northern Ireland, for the benefit of all our citizens.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Philip McGuigan to make a winding-up speech. You have 10 minutes.

Mr McGuigan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I begin by thanking those groups that have campaigned tirelessly on this issue and will continue, no doubt, to make sure that the issue is kept high on the agenda until it is successfully resolved. As a co-signatory to the motion, I thank all other Members who signed it, in particular Rachel Woods, who opened the debate.

If the subject matter of the debate — hydraulic fracturing, petroleum licensing and hydrocarbon extraction — can perhaps be a little complicated, the politics of the subject is conversely simple. If there was ever a time when extracting our energy sources from underground was appropriate, that time has long since passed. The Assembly, in one of the first debates upon its resumption after the New Decade, New Approach agreement, demonstrated that it wanted to take a new approach to the environment by declaring a climate emergency. It followed that up with a debate that signalled that the majority of MLAs want to see a climate Act legislated for in the North to help protect our environment. It is clear from those debates and, indeed, from the one today that the majority of political parties and MLAs want to see the Chamber be the source of progressive environmental legislation that not only looks to the future but helps protect the future.

In that scenario, we need to keep Ireland's fossil fuels in the ground and spend our time and energy researching, developing and promoting clean, renewable forms of energy. There is no wisdom in investing in fossil fuels, either from the perspective of a climate commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions or from an economic perspective. Minister, the Department for the Economy needs to stop wasting time on its review of petroleum licensing and, as the motion asks, immediately issue a moratorium on licensing until legislation can be brought forward that totally bans the practice of extraction. As has been pointed out, there are currently no petroleum licences in place in the North, so the time could not be better to cease the practice.

The motion is about more than just fracking. It is important, however, as others have done, to point out its dangers. Whether it is methane pollution and its impact on climate change, the pollution of air and water, workers and communities being exposed to toxic chemicals or soil contamination — all of which can lead to an increase in certain types of cancer, asthma, migraine and skin disorders and add risk to pregnancies — the risks of fracking are endless.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGuigan: Yes.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Member agree with me that the recurring issue of fracking and these processes hang like a sword of Damocles over communities in relation to health and safety and well-being, and that legislation is what is needed to deal with this issue?

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Member for the intervention, and I agree. I suspect that the communities of Fermanagh and along the north coast will have listened to the Minister and been disappointed that she has not added certainty to the subject today, when given the chance. It is not difficult to see why local communities, whether they be in Fermanagh, the north coast, in my own constituency at Ballinlea or close to Woodburn forest in County Antrim, have come together to resist the potential harm to their communities, their environment and their locality.

This motion is also about the risks associated with drilling exploratory wells, even when hydraulic fracturing is not initially being undertaken. Those risks expand and become cumulative if exploration becomes commercial and there is extraction using multiple wells. It is the licensing that opens the gates to all the harmful potential and risks. We need to close the door now so that companies do not come along and use other technologies, such as acidisation, or use coal seam gas production. We currently have a system that allows for development by stealth. The only way to ensure that it does not happen and that communities can breathe a sigh of relief is, as my party colleague has pointed out, by banning the practice and banning the issuing of licences.

It is time that we moved away from fossil fuel dependency. Countries all over the world are taking action on banning fracking. On these islands, in the South, Scotland, England and Wales, there is either a ban or a moratorium. As we move beyond the current pandemic to building a future, it must be based on certainty, sustainability and green growth. For that certainty, we need to rule out past practices that are no longer beneficial to us. That means implementing the tenets of this motion.

In the debate I think there were 11 speakers, or 12 or 13 if you include me and the Minister, and all spoke against the practices of fracking. Rachel Woods, who proposed the motion, talked about the importance of moving towards renewable energy from an environmental as well as an economic argument and clearly pointed out the dangers and the impact of fracking.

Gary Middleton spoke about all the strategies and policies in various Departments on moving forward with regard to energy and said that there is a bit of a dichotomy where some Departments are moving forward with a progressive approach but, hanging over our heads, we still have this issue that needs dealt with.

Jemma Dolan, my party colleague and the first of the Fermanagh contingent to speak, spoke about the impact on her constituents and the fear and worry that many in Fermanagh have about this, the local opposition and the reasons why there is local opposition, in terms of the damage to the local community and countryside.

Patsy McGlone talked about this being an opportunity in this Assembly to say that environmental issues are no longer second-class issues. Rosemary Barton, also from Fermanagh, talked about the beauty of her constituency and county and the impact that fracking would have if allowed to go ahead. John Blair welcomed Nichola Mallon's recent announcement on permitted development in oil and gas. That, in some way, details how in some Departments there are positive moves, but in others, less so.

Seán Lynch, again from Fermanagh, addressed the impact locally. He talked about how this impacts on climate change and about the all-Ireland impact of having two policies on this island that interact, particularly given the proximity of Fermanagh to the border. He also talked about his private Member's Bill, which he intends to launch for consultation very shortly and which would ban the practice of fracking. Sinead McLaughlin commended her party colleague, Mark H Durkan, who introduced the moratorium in 2015. Stewart Dickson talked about his constituents' experience of oil exploration in Woodburn and the concerns and the opposition there and the impact on the area.

4.00 pm

Steve Aiken, again supporting the motion, talked, as everybody else did, about how we need to move towards renewable energies. He talked about offshore wind, smart grid, hydrogen and biogas. He said that the North was too small an area for regulation, and, although he did not say it, I think that he meant that we needed an all-Ireland approach to such an issue [*Laughter*] along with all other issues.

Gerry Carroll put today's debate in the context of the climate emergency and, as have I done, talked about some good work. However, all the talking needs action to make it a reality. He talked about the impact on the public and public support, with schoolchildren, community groups and environmental groups all trying to protect the environment. He mentioned his concerns about the current licensing process.

The Minister put the debate in context. She talked about the current legislation having been in place since 1964 and said that, in that period, no commercial extraction has

taken place. If that does not send a signal that we do not need that legislation, I do not know what will. She said that her Department has recognised, over recent years, that we need a step change regarding policy objectives and that that should match public opinion. She went on to talk about the review in her Department and about the two current applications. She stated that 5,700 responses had been received. She did not give the details, but I imagine that a lot of them were opposed to the practices. As a result, one of the applicants, Tamboran, removed the need for fracking. However, as I have said, this debate goes much further than fracking; it is the issuing of petroleum licences that we need to cease. She said that her Department was considering the issues, and she gave reasons why she feels that she cannot come forward at the current time.

The motion goes beyond fracking. We do not, in my view, need a review of petroleum licensing policy; we need legislation to stop it. I hope that the Minister takes note of the strength of feeling of the political parties and the individual MLAs who have spoken today and actions that strength of support for today's motion into legislation in the near future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the moratoria, in various forms, on fracking in England, Scotland and Wales and the ban on fracking in the Republic of Ireland; notes that this motion builds on the 2015 strategic planning policy statement presumption against the exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbon extraction in Northern Ireland; acknowledges its responsibility to protect public health and the environment; and calls on the Executive to instigate an immediate moratorium on petroleum licensing for all exploration for, drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbons until legislation is brought forward that bans all exploration for, drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbons in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease. The next item of business will be an Adjournment debate, and we need to let the Health Minister and the various MLAs get into the Chamber.

Motion made:

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. —
[Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.]*

Adjournment

Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex: Acute Mental Health Facility

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In conjunction with the Business Committee, Mr Speaker has given leave to Mr Thomas Buchanan to raise the matter of the acute mental health facility at Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank all of the Members who have come to the Chamber for the debate this evening. I thank the Minister for coming along to listen to the debate, and I trust that, following the debate, we will have some positive news coming out of it.

Since the late 19th century, Omagh, the county town of Tyrone, has been known for providing a hospital facility for patients suffering from a mental illness. The Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, as it has been known since 1930, was opened in 1853 to accommodate 300 patients. The east and west wings were extended in the 1860s to accommodate more patients. Over the years, fortunately, great strides have been made in the medical profession so that patients with a mental illness can be treated in a much different setting.

Under the Department's Developing Better Services programme, the Western Trust embarked on a programme of works aimed at delivering the best possible service for the people in the south-west quarter of Northern Ireland and further afield, taking into account the vast rural nature of the area. That entailed the development of the new South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen, the new local enhanced hospital in Omagh and further development at Altnagelvin Area Hospital.

The new local enhanced hospital consisted of a three-pronged development. The hospital was to have palliative care, rehabilitation, day-care services; a primary care complex for GPs; and an acute mental health unit. It was to be developed in two phases: the local enhanced hospital and primary care complex in phase 1; and the acute mental health unit in phase 2. The Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex opened on 20 June 2017, but, as of today, no movement has taken place on the development of the acute mental health unit. In 2018, the Developing Better Services project team, tasked with the development of the mental health unit, was redeployed and the project team stood down. At present, the business case for the facility is with the Department of Health for approval. However, every time we have asked about where it is, we are told that it is subject to future budget availability.

No one is immune from poor mental health. It is no respecter of persons. The demand for mental health services is increasing, and our health service is not prepared to cope with it. Figures show that Northern Ireland is reported to have a 25% higher rate of mental health problems than England and significantly higher rates of depression than the rest of the United Kingdom. Mental illness affects one in four people at some point

in their life, causing major changes to their thinking, behaviour and physical and emotional feelings, affecting their ability to work and to have healthy relationships with others. Almost 50% of long-term absence from employment is due to mental health issues.

There is a great need for the acute mental health facility in west Tyrone. Statistics prove that the rate of diagnostics and treatment of mental health problems is lower in rural areas than in urban areas. Multiple factors contribute to that in rural communities: poor access to services; unemployment; welfare reform; hidden rural poverty; and an ageing population. It is an inequality in the health service that those living in urban areas are 74% more likely to receive medication for anxiety and 65% more likely to have received medication for depression than those, such as the people whom we represent in West Tyrone, who live in rural communities. In rural areas, families of those who have committed suicide have shared the distress of trying to get appropriate help but feel impeded by a combination of stigma and failure of services. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for farmers and those who live in isolated communities to struggle with their mental health. It is a sad reality that, across the United Kingdom, one farmer takes their own life every week. The Farm Safety Foundation suggests that 81% of young farmers believe that mental health issues are the biggest hidden problem facing farmers today. In too many cases, the issues that they struggle with go undetected and undiagnosed for far too long.

People who live in urban areas have easier access to mental health services. In West Tyrone, many of those struggling with their mental health do not know where to turn. Only 29% of people in Northern Ireland have contact with a secondary mental health service before death, whereas the figure in England is 91%.

The dearth of mental health services in rural communities has been highlighted and researched by Ulster University. It shows that there has been a particular reliance on general practitioners for mental health promotion and treatment. While GPs have knowledge of mental health conditions and diagnoses, it is not their specialist field. That is why the new acute mental health facility in Omagh is urgently needed so that people suffering from mental health problems can access the right specialist treatment in a timely and effective manner.

Strabane has been reported as being disproportionately affected by suicide. Most of those who die are aged between 25 and 35. Alarm bells should be ringing that young people — our next generation — feel so despondent and hopeless about the state of their lives and clearly see no help being available to them.

In the New Decade, New Approach agreement, an emphasis was placed on a greater focus on mental health and well-being, and delivering lasting changes and improvements to such services. The Omagh hospital and primary care complex has been open now for over three years, yet phase 2 of the acute mental health facility has not yet begun.

I stress to the Minister that I am very passionate about this project, and I am glad that he is with us in the Chamber. We would like some movement on the issue.

Through the confidence and supply agreement, the DUP was able to secure £50 million specifically for mental health. However, much of that money has been used to

relieve the current pressures on services and address funding gaps to ensure that current mental health services do not stop. The Bengoa report stated that we are papering over the cracks in the current system rather than investing in long-term strategic change. As publicly elected representatives for the people of Northern Ireland, we need to ensure that we are delivering the highest possible quality and value of care to patients and service users across the divisions of the health sector.

Evidence suggests that levels of poor mental health are at the upper end of the international scale in Northern Ireland due to the conflict that was experienced by our society. A mental health problem will only continue to deteriorate because of lack of action. Omagh witnessed some of the most horrific acts of violence during the Troubles, yet PTSD can happen many years down the line. With the increasing awareness of mental health issues, many people who witnessed horrific acts of violence have only recently sought help for the first time.

I can bear witness to that today about the people in Omagh, because many's a person comes into my office in tears about the mental health problem that they are facing, and they do not know where to turn. When you try to get them an appointment, it is far down the line and away out on the horizon. This is not where we ought to be. We need to be right up to date so that people can get an appointment as and when they need it. That is why I stress the urgent need for this new acute mental health facility in Omagh.

This is impacting on our future generations. Children who have parents with mental health issues are more likely to have mental health problems. There is a generational cycle, which impacts on the well-being of our subsequent generations. Northern Ireland has a disproportionately high rate of suicide among under-18s compared with the rest of the UK, and an increasing number of anti-depressants are being prescribed for those under 19 years of age. That shows a serious increase in the mental health issues that our young people face. Those statistics continue to rise year-on-year.

As a government, our priority, first and foremost, must be to make people's lives better.

Our efforts can no longer focus on initiatives that generate improvements in indicators of well-being for the majority who already enjoy good mental health rather than tackling the factors that contribute to creating meaningful change for those with mental illness or suicidal behaviour. Our next action needs to be meaningful for the most vulnerable.

Again, I plead with the Minister today to complete the development of the Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex with the completion of the new acute mental health facility. I plead with the Minister to look at the business case, get it brought forward and get the development under way for the benefit of people not only in the south-west quarter of Northern Ireland but further afield. I thank the Minister for being here to listen to the debate. We look forward to his response.

4.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Buchanan had up to 15 minutes to speak and used 10 minutes, I think. I have a list of five Members who wish to participate. The Minister must

have 10 minutes at the end, so I can allow each Member, say, seven minutes, if they wish to use their full time.

Ms C Kelly: In 2016, there was an announcement that Omagh was the preferred location for a much-needed and long-awaited acute mental health facility. At the time, the announcement was met with relief by many families across Omagh and West Tyrone. Children, young people and adults finally saw light at the end of the tunnel and hoped that, finally, they would no longer sit on a waiting list but would receive timely mental health interventions. However, as we know, there has been no movement since the business case was passed from the Western Trust to the Department of Health. That is why we are here today.

Almost daily, my office is contacted by families who are at their wits' end. Children, young people and adults are self-harming, taking overdoses and literally crying out for help. I cannot emphasise enough how awful it is to see people battle for months and years for help; how soul-destroying it is for families to witness someone go from bad to worse due to a lack of timely intervention; or how unacceptable that is when the need is so obviously there and is getting worse.

The services are not in place to deal with the current volume of referrals in Omagh and West Tyrone. That is absolutely no reflection on the work of our mental health professionals in Omagh. They work day and daily for those in their care, but they are also under serious pressure. They, more than anyone, recognise the need for substantial investment to treat and support those in our community who require urgent help.

Currently, Shine Play Therapy in Omagh, which is privately owned, supports children, young people and parents with referrals from parents, schools and social services. Children present with anxiety and suicidal thoughts, to name but two issues. That centre also works from a waiting list now. If that hugely important facility were up and running as it should be, children, young people and adults would not sit on waiting lists, resulting in their mental health deteriorating further. The Minister at the time stated that the new facility was an:

"important and much-needed second mental health facility in the Western Trust area."

Back then, it was much-needed: right now, it is vital.

The Western Trust has long since identified Omagh, in the southern sector of its catchment area, as the site of this acute mental health unit. I am sure that Members are aware that there are many health professionals in the Omagh area who are suitably qualified and experienced to deliver acute mental health services. In effect, the arguments have been made and won. What is needed now is for the Minister to be decisive and waste no time in making a decision that is long overdue.

Just three days ago, we supported World Mental Health Day. This year, the theme was "Mental health for all". The people of Omagh and West Tyrone need to see that in action, Minister. They need to see the construction of this crucial facility, which will, undoubtedly, meet their needs.

Mr McCrossan: I thank my constituency colleague Mr Buchanan for bringing this important Adjournment debate to the Assembly. I also thank the Minister for taking the

time to be here to listen to our concerns at this busy time of crisis and challenge.

Omagh town has a long and proud history of delivering first-class treatment for mental health and addiction issues. The staff at Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital and at Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex deserve immense credit for what they are doing. They are working under extreme and intolerable pressures, especially now that we are facing the second wave of COVID-19.

Mental health issues and suicide are ravaging our local communities across West Tyrone. From Burn Dennet the whole way to Fintona and Trillick, every family has been impacted by mental health issues through the suffering of either a family member, a friend or a neighbour.

There is a massive demand for services. On a weekly basis, I see concerned family members who have contacted my office and staff, and when speaking to local healthcare workers, I see that the challenges are great and that there is a need for intervention. There is huge consensus in West Tyrone that more needs to be done around mental health services. In my view, the coronavirus pandemic has only heightened and compounded this very difficult issue. In the debate yesterday, I referred to how mental health has affected various constituents of mine.

Indeed, it has recently been reported that referrals to the crisis resolution home treatment team that covers Fermanagh and Omagh have tripled in the last year. Much of that is due to the impact that the pandemic has had on local people. I do not believe that the pandemic or our collective response in the Executive and the Chamber inhibit the development of a mental health facility in Omagh. Rather, I believe that the pandemic is a catalyst for this development given the surge and the projected surge that services will, undoubtedly, face.

Omagh was promised an enhanced local hospital, which my constituency colleague Ms Kelly mentioned, that would present a new model for local healthcare delivery in West Tyrone and the Western Trust area. It was to consist of three elements: the Omagh hospital, with a range of services; an Omagh health and care centre to accommodate GPs; and a centre for mental health, with a full range of related and necessary services. While the first two, the Omagh hospital and the primary care centre, have been delivered, there has been a massive failure to deliver the third element. That has led to warranted claims that mental health services across our district are treated like a Cinderella service. It is important that that is addressed.

The people of Omagh town and West Tyrone are getting sick, sore and tired of failed and empty promises emanating from this very institution. They have had a decade of delays on the A5, the Strule campus delays and even the removal of the A&E services from Omagh town, which was a travesty that should absolutely not have happened. There was a strong sense of anger and frustration from the people of Omagh when those services were removed. Even with the fancy new building, there is still a huge gap in the necessary services for the people of Omagh.

In 2016, a Health Minister promised us — it was a DUP Health Minister, indeed — a £30 million mental health facility as part of phase 2 of the Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex. That facility would transform the delivery of mental health services across the Western

Trust area and go some way to treat the many individuals who suffer every day from mental ill health. However, fewer than two years later, the project board was stood down and the project shelved. That has not landed well with the people of Omagh, who already felt left out in the cold by the lack of investment in the town and by the asset stripping of necessary local services.

In the preceding three years, we have had nothing but stalemate. There has been no functioning Executive, and the mental health crisis facing our people and communities has worsened as a result of the absence of leadership in this place, which was necessary to support our communities. If anything, we have had three DUP and one Sinn Féin Health Minister who have all failed to deliver phase 2 of this project. We have had the same two parties, who, rightly, raise concerns and valid points in the Chamber, but this project could have been addressed in three years of stalemate and not landed on the desk of this Minister, who is already facing a very challenging set of circumstances. Leadership could have and should have been shown much sooner.

It is important to note that phase 2 included a state-of-the-art addiction unit for Omagh. That unit has still not been built.

Although I appreciate all the work that staff are doing at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, those facilities are not fit for purpose. There will be agreement around the Chamber on that. They are listed buildings and, probably, the oldest buildings in the possession of the Western Trust estate. Patients and staff — the entire community — deserve much better. Likewise, on that note, the facilities in Strabane are abysmal. They are not fit for purpose and need to be addressed. There is a need for accessible and user-friendly services that will make a person in difficult circumstances feel comfortable when entering and confident that they will get the necessary support, and not somewhere where they will be told that there is no one available and to go to an out-of-hours GP or A&E. People need the necessary care and intervention at that critical time, not to be sitting in busy waiting rooms. They deserve what they have been promised. I hope that the Health Minister — I am sure that he will — will act swiftly in re-establishing the project board and the entirety of phase 2 of this necessary project.

We, as elected Members for West Tyrone, have a responsibility, and we will work together collectively. It is not a political issue; concern for the health and well-being of our constituents is something that unites us all. Omagh has been asset-stripped of services, and that continues in rural communities such as ours in West Tyrone, from Loughmacrory to Castledearg through Strabane town, Omagh, Fintona and many other areas. We need to protect our rural communities, provide vital services and, at all times, ensure that services are available and fit for purpose at the critical point at which they are needed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have Mrs Barton on the list, but, as this is a constituency issue, constituency Members get called first. Do not worry, I will come to you.

Mr McAleer: I thank and commend Thomas Buchanan for tabling the Adjournment debate. One of the features of West Tyrone and, I am sure, many other constituencies is that there has always been a collegiate approach across all parties when it comes to health issues. That

has been the case throughout my experience. Previously, Ross Hussey and Barry McElduff were very much part of the team here in trying to achieve a cross-party, cross-community approach to improving the health provision in the district.

As was, rightly, pointed out, there is a very strong background of mental health provision in the Omagh district. The old hospital on the site was built in the 1850s, and it became the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in the 1930s. A wide range of highly qualified professionals live in the district, and generations of families have worked in mental health provision in the Omagh district. There is, therefore, a strong pedigree and long tradition in the area.

After years of campaigning by elected representatives, supported by clinicians and the wider community, Simon Hamilton's announcement, in 2016, when he came to Omagh, that Omagh was the preferred location for the new mental health inpatient facility in the Western Trust was greatly welcomed. There is a deficit in mental health services in the area. We see that, unfortunately, in the rise in suicides. As Daniel McCrossan said, that is compounded by the pressures of the COVID crisis, which require all of us to lock down and go into social isolation.

Due to my role in the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, I have a special interest in rural affairs. West Tyrone is an isolated rural constituency. One of the super output areas in West Tyrone, Owenkillew, is the number one, out of 890, most deprived area in respect of access to basic services in the North. Up until the most recent Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) census, Plumbridge, which is also in West Tyrone and will be served by this unit, had the highest level of deprivation in relation to access to services.

We are talking about an isolated rural constituency with very few services. Government statistics indicate that. We all know it: we all lobbied for the retention of the Gortin day-care facility, for example, because such things are vital.

4.30 pm

I give credit to Minister Poots for maintaining the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) initiative in the Agriculture Department. It addresses rural isolation in particular. He has kept up its funding, which is important. I am certain, as, I am sure, we all are, that the COVID crisis that we are experiencing now will cast a long mental health shadow in the time ahead. We will certainly need facilities such as the acute mental health facility in Omagh.

Let me go back to 2016. It was absolutely great news that Omagh was going to get the new facility. It was the second phase of the new hospital, about which we were all very happy. Of course, we were then very disappointed in 2018. I echo what Members have said previously: it is time to move on it now. The business case is with the Department. Everything is in place. I take this opportunity to urge the Minister to make the decision on it now, to get moving with what is an absolutely vital facility and to finish off the second phase of our new Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex.

Mr McHugh: I endorse more or less all that has been said by Members who have spoken previously, with one exception. A person politicises an issue when he starts throwing about allegations, such as the claim that none of

three DUP Ministers and one Sinn Féin Minister acted on this. That is not true. On every occasion, Ministers acted and took things as far as they could at the time. They are to be credited with having stepped up to the plate and taken on the job in the first instance, when some other parties have shied away from it.

I commend our current Minister of Health, who has an arduous task in every respect, but he stepped up to the plate prior to the outbreak of COVID and, since then, has been dealing admirably with the situation. He is to be congratulated for that.

I reinforce the point that we want that development to take place now. It is needed in our area, and in West Tyrone in particular. When it comes to provision of services, the answer that we often get is, "We provide for the greater number of people". That is why, in more rural areas — Castleterragh, Aghyaran, Carrickmore, Loughmacrory and so on — we often find ourselves deprived in that respect. In this case, however, we are the people coming forward with a greater number of people in many ways, because of our isolation in the first instance. Mr Buchanan referred to the isolation that many farmworkers in the community experience.

This is a service that is required in our area. Mental health services are there, but they need to be developed and improved. I ask the Minister to ensure that the facility is at the top of his agenda in the time ahead. Other priorities are there at present that none of us expected. In that context, however, we still hope that, when it comes to the provision of mental health services, the western area will be seriously considered and that we will have the development in Omagh.

Mrs Barton: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this Adjournment debate. We refer to this as a West Tyrone constituency issue, but I represent Fermanagh people who will use the facility, too. We have no such facility in Fermanagh.

For too long, Northern Ireland has had inadequate mental health inpatient facilities. Over a decade ago, in 2010, Michael McGimpsey, the then Minister of Health, decided on a major development of new facilities. Given the size of the Western Trust, which stretches from Londonderry in the north to Newtownbutler in the south, it was rightly decided that the trust required two acute mental health units. One was built, but the other, the second phase of the Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex, which we are discussing today, still awaits construction.

Unfortunately, in the meantime, years of budget cuts and the fact that it was perhaps a limited priority for some Ministers have regrettably left the project lagging behind. That is hugely regrettable. There is consensus among all the parties that a new mental health unit in Fermanagh and Tyrone is long overdue. However, in order to build the unit and deliver the project, which I am sure the current Health Minister hopes to do, funding will have to be made available. I hope that the consensus in the Assembly this evening will equate to consensus around the Executive table when the Minister looks for that funding.

Mental health is, I believe, at long last beginning to receive recognition, given the appointment of a mental health champion and the provision of the resources that she needs. Thankfully, the Minister has identified mental health as one of his key priorities. I especially welcome the

appointment. It will take many years, however, to resolve the imbalance in, and the historical underfunding of, mental health services. We already had appalling rates of poor mental health, and the pandemic, unfortunately, will not have served to improve those.

Moving forward, I would, indeed, welcome the provision of modern facilities for staff and patients. I believe that it is the very least that people with poor mental health in the west of the Province deserve.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I now call the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann. The Minister will have 10 minutes.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the Member for bringing this debate to the House, because it provides us with the opportunity to discuss the acute mental health facility at Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex, and mental health in general. I commend Mr Buchanan, who showed such passion and such sympathy for the needs of the rural population when it comes to accessing mental health services and the necessary support. For a long number of years, I sat on the then Agriculture and Rural Development Committee with the Member and Mr McAleer. It was an issue that was often raised, whether through Rural Support, young farmers or the tackling rural poverty and social isolation funding, which was well championed by the Committee. I always liked to see that joined-up working across Departments when it came to tackling the issue of mental health. The Executive have been able to build on that since their formation in January. We have an Executive subcommittee that looks at mental health, well-being, resilience and suicide prevention, so we have cross-party support at an Executive level for the real need to develop and enhance mental health support, provision and facilities.

As Members may know — some Members referred to this — for the last decade, work has been ongoing to improve mental health inpatient facilities across Northern Ireland through capital build projects. In 2010 — I think that this was referred to — it was determined that there should be six mental health acute inpatient units across Northern Ireland. There was to be one in each of the five HSC trusts, apart from the Western Trust where, due to geographical challenges, two units were to be built. I think that Mrs Barton referenced that in her contribution. Since then, new builds have been completed in Belfast, the Southern Trust and the northern part of the Western Trust. The new builds are state-of-the-art inpatient facilities that provide high-quality care to those suffering from mental ill health. I thank Members for recognising today that, despite the need for financial investment in the structures in which that healthcare is provided, the staff are providing high-quality care for those who need it most.

Building in the remaining three areas — the Northern Trust, South Eastern Trust and the southern part of the Western Trust — has, as Members rightly indicated, not yet commenced, and that is why we are here today. Given the difficult budget constraints that the health service has continued to operate under for a number of years, it was not possible to progress those projects simultaneously.

In 2018, therefore, my Department carried out a prioritisation exercise to determine the order in which the remaining three units would be built. A task and finish group was established to carry out that exercise, and the

group visited all old, acute mental health inpatient sites across the three trusts to establish a prioritisation list for the new builds.

The outcome of that exercise was that, on the basis of clinical risk and limitations of therapeutic benefit, the Northern and South Eastern Trust projects were deemed, at that point, to be of a higher priority and were, therefore, given approval to proceed to stage-1 design in December 2018. At that time, the Western Trust was advised that it would be given permission to proceed to stage-1 design in the 2021-22 financial year, subject to business-case approval and the commissioner's support being in place.

I inform Members that a bid for the funding to commence the new Western Trust unit in 2022-23 has been included in my Department's response to the recent four-year Budget exercise, the outcome of which is due towards the end of this year.

It is, of course, disappointing that we cannot progress that capital project, which would greatly improve the therapeutic experiences of those who need inpatient treatment in the Omagh area. However, that does not mean that my Department does not take seriously the need for improved inpatient units across the country or the need to ensure high-quality care for patients. Indeed, in recognition that the existing older mental health inpatient units provide a very unhelpful environment for therapy for patients who are facing the challenges of mental illness, my Department has prioritised funding over the last two years to carry out essential upgrades to the existing facilities. To date, the Western Trust has received a total of £1.2 million to carry out interim remedial work to improve safety, user experience and therapeutic benefit.

As we look to the future, particularly given the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on our communities, it will be important to ensure that mental health is adequately resourced to address capital demands and to ensure that adequate treatment and support services are available for those who need them. As Members will be aware, mental health services are already facing unprecedented pressures. Inpatient services are under extreme pressure, with workforce issues compounding an already difficult position. Our mental health staff are dedicated, caring, highly skilled and committed, but they are doing a very difficult job in increasingly difficult circumstances.

Mental health services in Northern Ireland have historically been underfunded, and parity of esteem is an aspiration that we have yet to achieve, but we are working towards it. The pressures that have been caused by the pandemic are significant. There is much to suggest that we are at the start of a surge in mental health needs. Early international evidence indicates an increase in need, especially for treatment of low-level depression and anxiety and among those with existing severe mental illness. Our trusts are reporting increasing referrals and heightened acuity of patients, and the general trend is towards new and increased pressures across the secondary-care mental health services.

We must ensure that our mental health system of the future can meet and adapt to the new challenges that have been brought about by COVID and can address those historical issues to ensure that all who need mental health care and treatment will receive it. Since taking up my post as Minister of Health, I have made it very clear that mental

health is one of my key priorities. On 19 May, I published the mental health action plan and the COVID response plan, with 38 actions to kick-start the reform of mental health services, and work to implement the action plan is progressing. However, there is also a need to ensure that mental health services are developed strategically and are evidence-based. The first cluster of actions in the action plan, therefore, revolve around a new 10-year mental health strategy, and I intend to publish a consultation draft of the strategy by the end of the year and a final strategy and 10-year funding plan by July of next year.

The new strategy will be person-centred, taking a whole-life approach, with a whole-system focus, and the aim is to ensure long-term improved outcomes for people's mental health. To support my Department in that work, I recently established a strategic advisory panel to provide co-produced policy advice and support. That panel has wide membership, including voluntary and community-sector representatives, individuals with lived experience, health and social care professionals, professional bodies and the mental health champion. My officials are already working closely with our partners in the voluntary and community sector and with the mental health champion to ensure that people with lived experience can meaningfully contribute to that work.

4.45 pm

As I have said many times, mental health is one of my priorities. I am honoured to be in a position where I can drive strategic change and improve mental health services. It is hugely important that we strive to reduce stigma associated with mental ill health, continue to push for parity of esteem with physical health, and provide adequate resource to ensure that we have a system that adequately cares for our community.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I thank you for allowing this Adjournment debate. I thank the Member who brought it and the Members who spoke in it.

Adjourned at 4.45 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Wednesday 14 October 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

Executive's Decisions Relating to Measures to be Taken in Response to the Increased Incidence of the Transmission of COVID-19

Mr Speaker: Members, having been given notice by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, under Standing Order 11, I have summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of an oral statement by the First Minister on the Executive's decisions relating to measures to be taken in response to the increased incidence of the transmission of COVID-19.

Before we commence, I thank Members for their patience last night. Ordinarily, I would seek to give Members greater warning of an additional sitting. I was, therefore, keen to keep Whips up to date as much as I could throughout the evening. Members know that, in recent weeks, I have been focused on ensuring that the role of the Assembly is respected and highlighting the expectation that Ministers should bring important matters to the House. Given the seriousness of the situation that we are in, I welcome the fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have chosen to bring an update on the latest Executive decisions to the Assembly at this earliest opportunity.

These are exceptional times. We are dealing with serious and complex issues. No matter our individual views, I acknowledge that the Executive and the Assembly have difficult choices and decisions to make in these worrying circumstances. We all need to recognise that. Therefore, it is right and proper that Members have the first opportunity available to raise questions with Ministers this morning on behalf of the communities that we represent.

Members, we all know that these sittings do not happen by themselves. I want to express my gratitude to all the staff who stayed on last evening at short notice, many of them until almost the midnight hour. I appreciate their complete dedication to the Assembly.

I have received notice from the First Minister that she wishes to make a statement. Members should make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. They can do this by rising in their place, as well as notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I have a number of names on the list to ask a question, and Standing Orders do not permit me to extend the time for questions after the statement beyond one hour. I, therefore, remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate per se, and long introductions will not be accepted.

I stress that a number of Members want to speak. I want to enable every Member in the House who wishes to ask a question and engage with the First Minister to have an opportunity to do so. That depends entirely on the cooperation of all Members, so please be concise. I will not allow Members to make long introductory statements. Please get to your question and let all Members have the opportunity to ask their relevant questions on behalf of their constituents.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Before I make my statement, I wish to associate myself with your comments about the staff and say that we deeply appreciate the work that they did late last night and early this morning to facilitate today's sitting. I just wanted to make that comment.

We wish to provide Members with an update on decisions that the Executive have taken in relation to essential actions needed to reduce COVID-19 transmission rates. There has been much coverage in the press about variations in restrictions, and it is with that in mind, along with the very worrying increase in numbers of cases and hospitalisations, that we have looked at the various levels of restrictions that we need now.

We all have a role to play to break this chain, and it is important that we all understand that. People pass COVID onto each other, and that happens in a variety of settings. Limiting our social contacts will play a role in breaking the chain. We have already asked everyone to assist us with this by not gathering in domestic settings, and that has been taken forward in regulations. We also have local restrictions in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area.

However, the numbers have continued to rise. The doubling rate is of grave concern, and hospitalisations are on the increase. That is deeply troubling, and more steps are now urgently needed. The Executive have discussed this and we have concluded that we must put the following measures in place. The first is maintenance of current household restrictions. This means a continuation of the restriction on meeting indoors and a limit on the number who can meet in a garden. There are existing exemptions for childcare, maintenance and other matters, and they will stay in place. However, as close-contact economy is proposed for closure, it would be consistent with that to prohibit the provision of those services — for example, hairdressing — in a domestic setting.

Bubbling is to be limited to a maximum of 10 people from two households. There should be no overnight stays in a private home unless in a bubble. People should work

from home unless they are unable to do so. In guidance, we will advise universities and further education to deliver distance learning to the maximum extent possible, with essential face-to-face learning only where that is a necessary and unavoidable part of the course.

There will be a closure of the hospitality sector apart from deliveries and takeaway food, with the existing closing time of 11.00 pm remaining. Other takeaway premises will then be brought in line with hospitality with a closing time of 11.00 pm. Retail will stay open. However, there will be urgent engagement with the sector to ensure that retail is doing everything that it can to help suppress the virus. There will be closure of close-contact services apart from those meeting essential health needs, which will be defined in the regulations to ensure continuation of essential health interventions and therapeutics. That will not include complementary treatments.

There will be no indoor sport of any kind or organised contact sport involving household mixing other than at elite level. There will be no mass events involving more than 15 people, except for allowed outdoor sporting events, where the relevant number for that will continue to apply. Gyms may remain open but for individual training only, with local enforcement in place. Places of worship are to remain open, with a mandatory requirement to wear face coverings when entering and exiting. That will not apply to parties to a marriage or civil partnership.

Wedding ceremonies and civil partnerships are to be limited to 25 people with no receptions. That will be implemented on Monday 19 October. Venues providing the post-ceremony or partnership celebration may remain open for this purpose this weekend but may not provide other services for people who are not part of the wedding or partnership, and this will be limited to 25. Funerals and committals are to be limited to 25 people, with no pre- or post-funeral gathering. In guidance, no unnecessary travel will be advised. Off-licences and supermarkets will not be permitted to sell alcohol after 8.00 pm.

We believe that the above restrictions should apply for four weeks, and the continuation or amendment of any element will require Executive approval.

In education, the half-term holiday break will be extended from 19 to 30 October, with schools reopening on Monday 2 November. To permit that, the Department of Education will allocate schools two optional days, with the remainder of the additional time being taken through exceptional closure days. As is the case in other jurisdictions, the Executive will keep the issue of schools, along with other considerations, under continuous review in the weeks and months ahead.

We fully appreciate that this will be difficult and worrying news for many people. The Executive have taken this decision because it is necessary, and we discussed the impacts in great detail. We do not take this step lightly.

We want the measures to have two impacts. First, on the COVID transmission rates, which must be turned down now or we will be in a very difficult place very soon indeed. Secondly, we believe that it marks a point at which everyone, each and every one of us, can take stock and go back to the vital social-distancing messaging.

We will, of course, engage with sectors and work on supports as a matter of priority.

We ask all children, young people and their parents to help us in a very particular way during the next few weeks. Please make sure that your children and young people follow the social-distancing arrangements during this time, limit socialising as much as possible and use the time in as positive a way as you can.

We will need to exit these arrangements most carefully. They will be put in place during Friday of this week and will remain in place for four weeks. Any extension or amendment to them will require a decision by the Executive. We must reach a different place on the numbers and on getting back to the basics of social distancing, and I know that everyone in the Chamber will want to work with us on that. Small acts can make large and important contributions to managing COVID-19. Wash your hands, practise social distancing and wear face coverings. Those are small acts, but they are vital. Thank you.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the First Minister for her statement. Judging by the hundreds of messages that I received overnight, people across the North went to bed last night not knowing if their children would be going to school today, if businesses would open or if they needed to go to work. The confusion over the past 24 hours has certainly not helped. We need to approach the pandemic as equal partners and do the heavy lifting in our communities together. Let this be the moment — the clean break — in which we provide people with the clarity, answers, support and direction that they need.

The statement is welcome, but what is missing is the specific financial detail that is desperately needed by businesses and workers. We know that one furlough scheme is about to end and that another is due to commence soon. In the light of the statement today, will the First Minister tell us what specific and tailored help there will be to prevent people from having to make the impossible choice between their family's health and their family finances?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairman for his intervention. There was never going to be a situation in which we would announce overnight that people had to do something the next day. That was never going to happen. That is why the restrictions will come into force on Friday to give people time to plan.

Most schools were planning to take a week off for the Halloween break. Some were taking four days and some were taking six days, but, in the main, they were going to take around a week. The Education Minister has proposed a way forward to minimise the loss of learning for our young people and that is hugely important. Others wanted to close the schools for a longer period. Fundamentally, the education of our young people is a right and their life chances absolutely need to be protected, and I am content that, with what he has proposed, the Education Minister thought long and hard about how he can help to reduce the incidences of COVID while protecting young people.

Yesterday, the leader of the SDLP told the Executive to get on with putting the restrictions in place. We had a very long and thoughtful Executive meeting last night and very difficult decisions were taken. I do not shy away from that or from the fact that many of the decisions will have a huge impact on people's lives.

Nevertheless, they are for four weeks, and we are very determined that this will be a time-limited intervention. The restrictions will not continue beyond those four weeks and the Executive will have to revisit them at that time.

10.45 am

It is important to say that we will be putting supports in place. Last night's discussion was about the interventions that we need to make. Tomorrow, the Executive will discuss the support systems that will be in place, and I hope that we will be able to sign off on those support systems. The Member is right to say that we need to support our businesses and their employees as they go through this most difficult of times. I hope that Member after Member, when they speak today, will not try to make trite political points. This is not the time for trite political points; this is a time for trying to find solutions for every one of our citizens as we face into this terrible situation together. I hope that we will have that cooperation across the House today.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the First Minister for her statement. On the issue of education and young people's welfare, what evidence did the Executive balance up to come to the decision to close schools for an additional week, given the impact that that will have? What evidence did the Executive weigh up?

Mrs Foster: As I have indicated, the Education Minister was very clear that we did not want to inflict any more damage on our young people. We realise that they were off school for a considerable length of time because of the lockdown in March. We had to look at the impact that that would have on peer socialisation and the whole culture of going to school and having that school experience. Of course, the loss of learning time is critical as well. Young people need to be able to take their exams at the end of the year so that their life chances are there for them.

Obviously, we had to consider the impact on vulnerable children and children with special educational needs (SEN) to make sure that they were covered as well. That is why we are only taking the route of the Halloween break as was, plus a number of extra days. It is right that we minimise that as much as we possibly can for our young people, recognising that, at the same time, we are trying to get the COVID transmission rate under control. That is why the break is starting now, so that we can have the maximum impact. I hope that we will be able to see that. This is a two-week break: children will return to school on 2 November. It is hugely important that I say that today.

Mr Gildernew: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an chomh-Chéad Aire as an ráiteas seo. I thank the First Minister for coming to make the statement today. While it is beyond doubt that these measures are now absolutely necessary and, indeed, urgently required, it is also the case that they will, as the joint First Minister mentioned, have implications and knock-on impacts. The system that is in place to test and trace has struggled to cope. Will the Executive use this opportunity to reboot and put in place an effective find, test, trace, isolate and support system and ensure that every element of that system is working so that we do not find ourselves back in this place again?

Mrs Foster: The Member raises an important point about the capacity of our health service. That is something that we will have to revisit over the next number of weeks.

The health service and the test, trace and protect system are fundamentally, in the first instance, a matter for the Health Minister, and I am sure that he will make his own comments today in relation to all those matters. We know that the health service was under pressure before we came back in January but we need to scale it up in the coming days. It needs to be fit for purpose and it needs to have capacity. It is reforming, although I accept that it is difficult to reform when we are in this crisis situation. If we need to have mutual aid and assistance from the rest of the United Kingdom, we should not stop ourselves from asking for it. At present, we are managing the ICU beds and hospital capacity but we need to make these interventions so that we can continue to deal with ICU capacity and all the other problems.

He is right to mention that there are different elements of test, trace, protect and isolate. It was good to hear from the Communities Minister last night that, with our discretionary payment system, we were ahead of the game in supporting people who had to isolate. Tomorrow, when we look at the range of supports that we have in place, we will say more about those issues. We felt that it was important to come to the House today to outline the issues with the restrictions, but we will have much more to say tomorrow about the supports that will be in place to try to assist people, whether they have to self-isolate or whether they are people whose businesses have to close across those four weeks to try to help us to get the COVID virus under control.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed, First Minister, for making the statement to us today. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I pass on our thanks to the Northern Ireland Executive, and all the parties in it, for coming to these particular difficult decisions in the time in which they had to make them and in these challenging circumstances, particularly regarding the impact on our health service.

Bearing in mind the importance of what we need to do to make societal changes, what are we doing to ensure that our Executive, and the parties supporting them, communicate effectively and deal with these issues? We all, collectively, need to work together to ensure that the message goes out to the people of Northern Ireland that we have to make these changes because we do not, and our health service does not, have the time. We have to make these changes.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his commentary. I am sure that Executive colleagues will thank him for his position in relation to our decision last night. The Health Minister has been very clear with us about the capacity of the health service. If we had not taken the interventions last night that I am communicating to you today, our health service would not have been able to deal with what was coming down the line. That was very concerning for all of us.

These are very difficult decisions. As all of us know, we are being asked about elective surgery, cancer care and all those things. People need to understand that, because we have to spend so much time dealing with the rise in COVID, we have to turn off elective surgery and all those things. The two things are intertwined in that way. If we — all of us, personally — do not take action, the rise of COVID will stop all those other things from happening. Sometimes people say that we are not doing enough about surgery, heart disease and all those other things. That is

because of the rise of COVID. It is because people are not taking personal responsibility for their own behaviour.

So, if today amounts to anything, it will be getting out the message that people need to take personal responsibility for their actions. That would be a very positive thing to come out of the Assembly today. I hope that we all want to protect the health service, minimise the number of deaths that occur and protect our economy and the well-being of society here in Northern Ireland. It is about that balance. I have talked all week about trying to take proportionate action and achieve a balanced way forward. That is what we tried to do last evening.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, First Minister, for your statement. You will not find the Alliance Party disagreeing with you when you say that the public health message must be the first message and our first priority. However, there are businesses across Northern Ireland that will be hurting today. There will be businesses that will be making very difficult decisions about not just the support that the Executive will give them but whether there is a future for them. Can you assure businesses across Northern Ireland that urgent action will be taken to set out clear support for them?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I absolutely can. As the Member knows, the Chancellor announced new supports that will kick in on 1 November. It is not as generous as the furlough scheme that was put in place for the lockdown back in March. Of course, we are not in a lockdown situation now; we are putting in interventions for a limited period of time. However, that does not take away the fact that a lot of businesses will be suffering and will be worried. I have said many times that we get bad health outcomes if people are unemployed, if they are in poverty or if they are in a situation in which they see no way out. We have to give them that hope and that determination that there will be better days, but there will be better days if people take personal responsibility for their actions. I know that people think, "It doesn't apply to me because I'm fine, and if I get it, I get it and that is it". The point is that they are impacting upon our hospitals, upon our economy and upon the whole way of life here in Northern Ireland. So, I plead with people today to please take personal responsibility for your actions. Please work with us so that we can, as we did in March and April, get this virus under control. People looked at this part of the world and said that Northern Ireland is doing very well. I want to get back to that place, but I can only do it if people work with us all. I know that there are many people who are affected by our decisions today, and they will want to see what we have to say tomorrow in relation to specific supports. I very much hope that we can sign off on those tomorrow at the Executive.

Ms P Bradley: First Minister, I want to go back to the issue of education. Can you share with us any of the evidence that the Executive were shown around the risk? Are there any other ways of mitigating that risk? As an MLA, I have received emails from headmasters and headmistresses from various schools wanting to know why they are having to have this extra week. You mentioned SEN. How seriously was the balance taken with special educational needs schools and children, given the fact that many of those of children need that stability and need structure in their lives?

Mrs Foster: I absolutely concur with her about children with special educational needs. During lockdown, it was so difficult for many of those young people and their parents. I recall an email from a lady in Craigavon who told me that her child was in such a way of going to his place of education every day that, despite the fact that the school was not open, she had to drive him to it every day because that was the routine that he was in. These decisions have weighed very heavily on us today, particularly protecting our young people. That is why we have kept the school closures to an absolute minimum. I think that that was the right thing to do. Children would be off for half-term in any event, and we have lengthened that by a couple of days. I know that for some parents that will be a challenge with childcare, but I hope that giving them that extra time to plan over the next couple of days will assist in that.

The Public Health Agency (PHA) has been doing some work with the Education Department on the incidences of COVID in schools. It has told us that, as of Sunday evening, 485 incidences had been risk-assessed with schools and that many of those incidences involved a single case. Fewer than 10 schools have required support for two or more incidences, and the overall assessment, as advised by the Public Health Agency, not the Department of Education, is that there is limited transmission in school settings. There are other issues around school gates, transport and issues like that, and we are going to work with the Department of Education to look at how we can minimise the risk around some of those issues. In the school setting, there is limited transmission, according to the PHA. I welcome that because it gives us clarity on schools. I know that a lot of parents are worried about their young people, and they should look at that evidence and take some reassurance from that.

Mr Boylan: Clearly, Minister, the decision to close the schools has been a difficult one for the Executive and, indeed, for all of us, but it is based on medical and scientific advice and is a necessary step. Can the Minister outline the focus of the review in two weeks' time to ensure that we keep taking the right decisions, even if those decisions are very difficult?

Mrs Foster: Thanks to the Member for his question. It has been a very difficult decision not just around schools but around all the different interventions that we are taking. We very firmly are of the opinion that the intervention in schools should be for a short a period as possible.

There were demands for a longer, open-ended lockdown for schools. We believe that a limited intervention is best. We can then assess that to see what the impact is.

11.00 am

As I indicated to the Member, the overall assessment by the Public Health Agency is that there is limited transmission in school settings, but there may be some issues outside school settings that we will need to try to mitigate. That does not just happen. A lot of work has gone into that by staff and teachers in schools and by young people themselves. I really want to acknowledge that. On my way up the road from Fermanagh this morning, I was speaking to a school principal, who said that young people are very resilient and work very well when they know what is expected of them. We should pay tribute to our young people and the way in which they have dealt with what is a strange time. We all remember our school days. Certainly,

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for me, you did not have to put on a mask before getting on a bus or walking down a corridor, and you did not have to stay in the same classroom whilst your teachers moved around. I want to pay tribute to all our young people as they deal with the strangest of times.

Mrs Cameron: I wish to place on record my condolences to all the families who have lost a loved one through this hateful virus. I appeal to everyone to follow the law and the guidance to the letter to avoid more preventable deaths.

I thank the First Minister for her statement, which is not welcome but is entirely necessary. What advice is now available for those who were previously shielding? Can the First Minister give an update on the utilisation of the Belfast City Hospital tower block facility? Will there be childcare provision in schools for front-line key workers, in particular healthcare workers?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her questions. On the last point about key workers, because the schools are closed for a limited period and because the half-term holidays are happening in any event, it will be very difficult to have provision in schools for key workers. I regret that. Obviously, had it been for a longer period, we would have had to find a way round that. As she knows, we, unlike the Republic of Ireland Government, kept our schools open for the children of key workers during the March lockdown. Indeed, people availed themselves of that provision, and we are very glad that it was there for the many people who had to go to work as key workers to facilitate the rest of us.

The Nightingale facility is being stood up, but, at the moment, that is only happening on a Belfast Trust basis, not a regional basis. It may well be that we have to stand it up quite quickly on a regional basis. More people are requiring specialist clinical care in intensive care units. That was the case in the Mater Hospital and in the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH), so it was felt that there was a need across the Belfast Trust to expand COVID ICU from the Mater and the RVH and to relocate to the tower block at Belfast City Hospital. We hoped that we would not have to take that step again. If I were a prophet, or the daughter of a prophet, I would probably say that I expect the Nightingale hospital to be in place on a regional basis pretty soon. I regret that that is the case, but I think that we will need to put that in to facilitate demand and to make sure that we have enough ICU beds to deal with the hospitalisations that, unfortunately, are increasing on a daily basis.

Ms Ennis: I want to acknowledge the fact that these decisions today have not been taken lightly. They have been taken with people's best interests and public health at their core, and that should not be forgotten.

I go back to Stewart Dickson's comment about businesses and jobs and the huge challenges being faced by those affected. While the businesses being ordered to close will be able to access the extended job support scheme from the beginning of November when furlough ends, businesses in the supply chain will also be impacted. Will the Executive ask the Economy Minister to look at supporting such businesses that also face a loss of earnings?

Mrs Foster: The Member raises a very pertinent point about the supply chain. The Economy Minister and I have already had conversations about that. Whilst businesses in, for example, the hospitality sector are closed, they

can avail themselves of the new supports that are there. Businesses in the supply chain, however, cannot do so, because we are not ordering them to close. As an Executive, we need to be very conscious of that.

It is certainly something that we will want to try and assist with.

We will not be able to mitigate all the losses — it is only right that I am honest and open about that — but it is also important that we try to support those businesses as much as we can. We have extra funding now with the Barnett consequential that the Chancellor announced on Friday, which is in the region of £200 million. I understand that other money is available from the COVID spend that we already had. We have, I think, in the region of £300 million to deal with these issues. However, as the Economy Minister pointed out to us last night, when she intervened with the grants systems — the £10,000 and £25,000 grants — that cost in the region of £340 million. The scale of this is very big. We are not in a similar situation to March because we are not in lockdown. Businesses and work can continue, but for those sectors that we are specifically closing, we have to find mechanisms to help them, and that is the focus moving on from today and tomorrow.

Mr McNulty: The Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Michael McBride, who has been as solid as a rock throughout the pandemic, is on record saying that he would be happy for his guidance to be published. People, individuals, families and businesses are now even more anxious, fearful and confused. Given the severity of the situation and the impact of the proposals being made here today, do you intend to publish the Chief Medical Officer's guidance? We need to break the chains of transmission of this virus, but we need to break the chains of transmission of anxiety, fear, speculation and conspiracy. Can you tell the people that we will defeat this virus if we all play our part and work together?

Mrs Foster: I would love to break the transmission of conspiracies and fake news that emanate from this place on a daily basis. Unfortunately, that is not a matter for me. It is a matter for other people who decide to leak half-truths and half-stories that cause anxiety and concern amongst people, right across Northern Ireland. It is one of the reasons why I wanted to come to the House today and set out, very clearly, what the Executive have actually agreed, as opposed to what people think that we have agreed.

The Member talks about the medical advice from Dr McBride, who has been a great help and support to the Executive, as has our Chief Scientific Adviser. Very helpfully, somebody leaked the Executive paper on Monday of this week, with all of Dr McBride's advice in it, so that is already out in the public domain. I do not think that that was helpful because, as I have said in the House many, many times, this is a balanced approach that we need to take. It is about health, the economy, society and the family that we all love and want to cherish and care for. So, we have to take things in the round. That is why, yesterday, when we met as an Executive, we had many decisions to take, many assessments to make and many risk assessments to take, and that is what we were doing late into the night. We have come up with a package. Frankly, because we are in a five-party coalition, we have to try to get consensus and move forward together. I make no apology for that. People want us to move forward together. If it was left to one individual party or another, it

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would probably be a different announcement today. We have come to this Executive decision; we all have to abide by that decision, make it work for all the people of Northern Ireland and cut out the transmission of the virus. That will only happen if people take personal responsibility, listen to what we are saying in guidance and regulations and work together for the good of everybody.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for her statement. The PSNI previously categorised the pandemic as a health, rather than a policing, crisis and it is approaching it with a strategy of the four Es — engagement, education, encouragement and, finally, enforcement. First Minister, what discussions have you had with the Minister of Justice to ensure appropriate enforcement of these new measures?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Enforcement is very important. I accept the strategy of the police in trying to inform, educate and encourage people to do the right thing.

At some stage, we must also get to the point where penalties are in place to deal with some of those recalcitrant people who will not do the right thing. As the Member will know, the Justice Minister brought forward new penalties to the Executive, which we ratified last week. As well as that, the Executive have their enforcement group, which is working not just with the Police Service of Northern Ireland but with local government, environmental health, the Health and Safety Executive, and, I hope, with some in the larger retail sector.

I said in my statement that we would be engaging with the retail sector. We have not closed the retail sector. It is still open, but we want to work with the sector to mitigate some of the compliance issues that are very clearly there at present, and I hope that it will work with us to try to make sure that its staff and customers are safe. We will be doing that over the next couple of days.

Mr Allister: The last 24 hours have been far from confidence building. For weeks we were told, apparently on medical advice, that our homes were the danger spots, pubs were safe and you could see your granny in the pub, so to speak. Now we are told that hospitality has to close, and of course the great losers in that will be some of the lowest paid in our society.

Kids have had 28 days of schooling in seven months, and now schools are to close. What assurance is there that we are not just going into lockdown by stages; that if things are not better in a fortnight, our schools will reopen? Meanwhile, off-licences are open. My specific question is this: during the two weeks, are schools expected to provide facilities for key workers? Some teachers have been diligently in school since March. Does that have to continue? In respect of sporting events, can, for example, Irish League matches continue with the present level of supporters?

Mrs Foster: Irish League matches are assessed as elite sports, and the spectators who have been risk assessed can continue, as I understand it. In terms of key workers, as I indicated to Ms Cameron, because it is such a short closure — it is not actually a closure at all; it is just a lengthening of the holidays — as I understand it, we will not be able to facilitate key workers' children in school, so teachers will be off for those two weeks and will not be in school during that time.

He is right to highlight the fact that off-licences will be closed early. That is an important point. The rationale for that is that if public houses and other hospitality venues are closed, at night-time, there may be a situation where people would seek alcohol and then go to house parties. Of course, the Member is right to say that homes and house parties are still an issue needs to be dealt with, and, indeed, anywhere where social contact is increased. That is why I am asking and pleading with people around personal responsibility and cutting down on the number of social contacts that you have, and if you are in contact with people, that you social distance, if you are in a retail environment, that you wear a mask and that you do all the things that we are trying to do to cut down on the transmission of the virus.

This is a serious moment for Northern Ireland, and people will either work with us or they will decide that they will go their own way. However, going their own way has consequences — huge consequences for our health service, and they should remember that because everyone uses our health service not just those with COVID-19.

Mr Carroll: I want to categorically say that what happened last night was an absolute shambles. People are scratching their heads asking what is going on up in this Building. Does the First Minister agree with me that a much better approach to tackling the virus would be to adopt a zero-COVID strategy with the necessary financial assistance for the vulnerable, rather than having an endless cycle of circuit breaker and surge, which would undoubtedly cause greater harm to people's health and livelihoods in the long run, especially of low-paid workers?

Mrs Foster: The Member always thinks that there is a magic money tree at the bottom of the road. There is no magic money tree. The money has to come from somewhere.

11.15 am

The UK Government have stepped up to the plate in relation to the furlough scheme and the financial assistance we have received during the pandemic. Again, the Chancellor came forward with a scheme, which I recognise is not as generous as the furlough scheme, but the money has to be paid back sometime. We are now in a huge amount of debt as a nation, and that will have consequences for young people in the future. Young people have suffered enough through this pandemic, to be blunt, and we need to find a way to deal with that.

We will be putting in supports for businesses. The Executive will meet tomorrow. The Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy are working on these issues, and we will discuss them in detail at the Executive tomorrow.

Ms Sugden: I thank the First Minister for her statement. I also acknowledge the fact that the Health Minister is in the Chamber. Sadly, the Northern Ireland Executive have treated the House with contempt over the past number of days, so I appreciate you being here and, finally, giving the House the respect that it deserves.

First Minister, will there be guidance in the next 24 hours to add meat to the bones of some of the announcements that you have made? Already, I am being bombarded with questions, and will do my best to answer them, but I am struggling to do that on the basis of what is here. I

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appreciate the fact that the regulations will, perhaps, go into that detail, but if there was a piece of work to be done, it would be about giving clarity to the audience, the people who need the information.

When you are developing a financial package for the businesses that will have to close through government instruction, will you be mindful of those that will be directly impacted by closures in hotels, for example — so, musicians and other businesses that work with hotels, whose business will, literally, go to zero from Friday, or even Monday? How are we going to support them? Sadly, some of those businesses have not been supported up until now, and this will only compound the issue, not least for them but for the wider economy.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question, although I do not accept that we are treating the House with contempt. As you know, Mr Speaker, I was in front of you on a number of occasions last week, and this week. The Minister of Health considers this Chamber to be his second home, so it is wrong to say that we treat this place with contempt — very, very wrong.

In terms of help for artists, we are very much aware of that issue. As I understand it, the Minister for Communities has put together a scheme that she will be rolling out soon. A lot of the artists, event organisers and what have you who the Member speaks about have not been able to find work or been able to work for a considerable time. The Minister for Communities is very much aware of that issue, and will be dealing with it.

In terms of questions and answers, yes, the regulations will bring more clarity to the issues that we decided on last night. There will also be, as I understand it — and I am sure that she will keep me to this — a question and answer digest on nirect, which will be published as soon as we can do that. I absolutely accept that many questions will be asked by our constituents across Northern Ireland, so it is important that we try to get that information out to Members.

Ms Bunting: The World Health Organization states that it does not support draconian restrictions or lockdowns, and that they should be used only to buy time to prepare. It also says that poverty will double, as will mental ill health cases, in the next year if this continues.

As the First Minister said, the debt is rising, and there are going to be fewer and fewer people in work to repay it. So, what is being done to protect jobs? More specifically, will the First Minister clarify whether the Executive is looking at help for those who have received none to date, and what is meant by “essential health needs”?

Mrs Foster: “Essential health needs” will be defined in the question and answer document that we will put out. I accept that my essential health needs might not be somebody else’s essential health needs, so there is a need for clarification on that. We will get that out as soon as we possibly can.

I accept what the Member said about the World Health Organization saying that lockdown should be only a last resort and a time to prepare and to get capacity dealt with. Clearly, this is not a lockdown. Work continues. People will be working from home where possible, and other work will continue. Retail and manufacturing remain open.

I accept the points about the supply chain in the hospitality sector. That is something that we need to look at.

This is a difficult time, and we will need to bring forward supports for the parts of the economy that are being impacted on by the decision that we made last night. As I say, we will have those discussions tomorrow, hopefully with announcements thereafter.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis ar maidin. I thank the First Minister for her statement this morning. I listened to her say in response to another Member’s question that the clear message coming from the Executive is that people have to take responsibility: of course, that is absolutely true. However, people are also asking how we, as political leaders and as the Executive, are doing our part to deal with the virus. Some countries have been much more successful in dealing with it. They have used much more nuanced methods and tools to fight it than we have. Despite the First Minister’s assertion that the measures will last for only four weeks, if we do not get our act together, we will have to impose more restrictions. The fact is that the imposition of such restrictions and the first lockdown were a blunt instrument. Does the First Minister agree that, if we do not start to put in place a proper system of rigorous testing, tracing, isolating and supporting, we will face more and more restrictions in the future?

Mrs Foster: Personal responsibility is a huge part of it. I say to the Member that, whilst we can put in place all the restrictions that we desire as a Government, if they are not complied with, the virus will continue to spread. Therefore, people need to take personal responsibility for their actions, and they need to understand why that is important. I accept that we have a role in that in laying out why it is important that they take those decisions. I look across Europe and other parts of the world, and I see the targeted interventions that they are making. I think that, last night, the Netherlands made an intervention similar to what we have been talking about today.

It is a time-limited intervention. It is one that, we hope, will bring the R number below 1. At the minute, the R number is about 1.4 or 1.5. We need to get it below 1, because that takes away the transmission of the virus doubling and what have you. It is important that we get the R number below 1, and that is what the intervention is about. When that happens, we can come out of the intervention. That does not mean that we then go around as though everything is normal again. We will still have to do the basics: social distancing and washing our hands. That is the problem: in the summer, we became quite lax and relaxed. We thought that things had gone back to normal. Unfortunately, however, the virus was still there. As a result, we are now in a situation where we have to make these interventions. I very much regret that that is the case.

Nothing about this is inevitable. If people now take personal responsibility for themselves and start to do the right things, we can ensure that this intervention will be the one that made the difference and stopped the transmission of the virus.

Mr Lyttle: Our health, our economy, our education and our well-being rely on everyone in our community complying with the guidance. It is a stark wake-up call to everyone in the community that we must comply with the guidance to protect life and livelihood.

Will formal childcare and school-based childcare remain open? What evidence led to a ban on youth sports rather than on spectators gathering at youth sports?

Mrs Foster: Childcare continues as is; there is no change in respect of childcare. We think that that is very important, because we know the pressure that parents were under during the March lockdown. By "school-based childcare", I think, the Member means after-school clubs and such things. Obviously, they will not happen because the children will be on a holiday and there will be nobody at the schools.

With regard to youth-based contact sports, obviously, contact sports are not now happening for anyone apart from at elite level. We hope that that will stop transmission of the virus. The Member's reference to spectators is well made, because there have been some bad examples.

We have seen them over this past number of weeks. Unfortunately, we have seen the consequences as well. We have seen clusters and spikes in various places, and that is no accident.

Spectators will continue to be able to attend Irish league games, rugby and other elite sports but they will be very much socially distanced and regulated. We will work with the different sporting codes to make sure that that is the case, and, of course, all these things will be looked at again in the round.

Mr Speaker: A further six Members wish to speak. If all Members take a shortcut to their question, we might just get them all in. Please, keep your questions concise.

Mr Stalford: I will try not to take that as a hint.

Mr Speaker: Do not take it personally.

Mr Stalford: First, I thank my Rt Hon friend for her statement. It is important that the health messaging was not undermined by my Rt Hon friend at any point. She has striven valiantly to do her best throughout this crisis. Others, including a signatory to the statement, had a hand in undermining public confidence in the health messaging. The measures that have been announced will impact on the lowest paid, particularly in the hospitality sector. Can she give me further information about that?

Further, yesterday's 'News Letter' editorial stated:

"It is incredible that school closures could even be back on the table, especially as the idea was rejected by ministers in the Republic."

Will my Rt Hon friend resist, absolutely, any attempt by the Executive to extend the closure of our schools? It is crucial that our children and young people have access to their education.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. We are all very conscious of hospitality workers and the fact that many of them are on zero-hours contracts and the minimum wage. When I say that the new job support scheme is not as generous as the furlough scheme, I am thinking about those people. The new job support scheme gives two-thirds of payment, and, of course, that is only if you are not on a zero-hours contract, have not been made redundant or you are a flexible worker. We fully accept that, and there is a need for us to be aware of that. I hope that, later today, I will meet with representatives of

Hospitality Ulster, and we will discuss some of these very important issues.

The Member is right to point out that, at the highest level of their tiers in the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, in England, there is no suggestion that education will close. Let me be clear: education is not closing in Northern Ireland. We are just taking an extended holiday break to facilitate the R number being pushed down. We are not closing schools. It is very important that we say that. Schools will come back on 2 November. I want to say that very loudly. I know that there has been some commentary this morning from very worried parents who think, "This is the start of it. Now, we are going to be in a situation where our children are not going to be at school. We are going to be back in a March/April situation where children are not getting the learning that they need to move ahead with their lives". To be very clear: children will return to school on 2 November. I think that that is absolutely the right thing to do.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, First Minister, for your statement here today. This has been a very difficult decision for all members of the Executive, and we have to get it right. It is really difficult to get the balance right between lives and livelihoods. I have a very close friend who is fighting this virus in the hospital. So I am very cognisant of the public health messaging and welcome it here today.

I am going to ask you a question that is not my question: I got it from a business leader in Derry. Bearing in mind that the city is already nine days into these restrictions, he said, this morning, "These restrictions are a further disaster for Derry, the lowest paid and hospitality. Most hairdressers and barbers rent a chair. The city centre is a scary place right now. Foyle side is 77% down in footfall. Taxis and small retailers are on their knees. Never mind poverty, many will be plunged into destitution. Supporting these restrictions without support going directly to these individuals is enormously dangerous and unforgivable." What would you say, First Minister, to that business leader?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I am very sorry to hear that she has a friend suffering from COVID in hospital and I send my good wishes to her.

11.30 am

The Member asked a direct question. I recognise that her local government area has been in these restrictions for a period. Hopefully, we will see, in the next couple of days, whether they have had an impact on the transmission of the virus. As Members know, a lag time is required for there to be any impact on transmission. I hear what she says about the lowest paid. We will have a discussion tomorrow to try to give clarity around all of that.

Retail remains open, as she knows, but I accept that footfall is down. When we first introduced household restrictions in such places as Ballymena and Belfast, we saw footfall go down dramatically. Retail is still open. You can still travel in a taxi, with the appropriate safeguards, but I accept that some people will hear this announcement and not want to be out and about. It is OK to be out and about, so long as you take the appropriate safeguards. That is important, because we need to get the balance of keeping the economy going — at a lesser level than

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we would like, I accept — and making sure that we keep people safe. She will know that, given that her friend is in hospital suffering from COVID, and her great passion for the economy of the north-west. I understand that.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for attending this morning. I join Pam Cameron in paying tribute to the families who have lost loved ones this week due to COVID. I am sure that the First Minister will join me in that. I also pay tribute to the many teachers who have been on their knees for a number of weeks and have done their best in our schools.

Schools are facing ongoing pressures. Will the First Minister give a commitment that the Executive will support the Finance Minister and the Education Minister in providing what is required for the development of blended learning and online facilities that may be required for further school omissions? Will she also give a commitment that all evidence taken in respect of further school closures will be from the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer?

Mrs Foster: I send my sympathy and empathy to those who have lost loved ones to COVID-19, or to any other disease, over the past period. It was remiss of me not to do that when Mrs Cameron raised the issue.

I think that I have been clear that the last thing that we want to do is to get to a situation in which we are in blended learning — that awful phrase — again. I do not think that it helps children, and it is a huge pressure and strain on teachers. I pay tribute to our teachers for having taken up that strain earlier this year. I have pointed out that, from the PHA's point of view, there are low transmission rates in schools, but I accept that there are issues around schools for which we may need to put in more mitigations.

As a policy objective, we should always try to ensure that our children have an education and are at school. That is what I want to ensure, and I hope that I will be joined in that by other Executive members. I hear what the Member said about taking interventions in school, and blended learning, but we also have to take into account the impact that being at home and not integrating with their peers will have on children's future life chances and mental health. I have seen that across the piece when children — maybe lone children or only children — have been at home on their own, without any interaction with other younger people. It is not good for children not to be together. Therefore, my point of view is that education should be our number one priority. I hope that that is the view of all Members.

Mr Catney: Thank you, First Minister. Given that the restrictions come into effect on Friday, it is crucial that businesses have clarity. Will you commit to publishing the full guidance to businesses by the end of the day and outline the support that will be put in place?

Mrs Foster: I accept that businesses need clarity and guidance, and that they need to see the regulations. That is why the restrictions are coming into place on Friday as opposed to today. That will give time to deal with the issues so that people will have clarity. As I have said many times, I hope that the support package will be signed off tomorrow as well.

Miss Woods: I thank the First Minister and Health Minister for coming to the House. I note that the closure of some of our sectors, while having others open, was surely, on

the face of it, a purely political decision, without seeing the evidence of transmission in certain settings. It was also, surely, a political decision not to have adequate support in place before today's announcement, but I am glad to learn that information is due tomorrow.

There remain so many questions. What is unnecessary travel? Is it enforceable? What is a "mass event"? What happens to hotels and B&Bs? What about those who were shielding before? What do they do? Will there be information for them? For the hospitality industry, the majority of whom have gone above and beyond to keep their staff and customers safe in exceptionally difficult circumstances, is the new furlough scheme it?

Finally, First Minister, a specific question: when exactly do these changes come in? Will you clarify when closures come in for the hospitality sector? Are last orders in pubs and restaurants tomorrow night or Friday?

Mrs Foster: The Member covers a lot of ground in a short time. Shielding is an issue that Mrs Cameron raised, and I did not get a chance to answer her. Shielding is being looked at by the Chief Medical Officers across the four nations. During the lockdown, the Member will recall, we took a huge, blanket approach to shielding. The Chief Medical Officer told me this week that nearly 280,000 people were shielding, which is incredible. When we started, we thought it would be about 80,000 people. We need to take a more nuanced approach to that. There are a lot of people who are vulnerable, or perhaps older, who are very worried at present, and we must recognise that. We should not use terms like "lockdown", because those people will hear those terms and feel that they should not be going out anywhere, should just be in the house and they will be afraid and worried about that. Shielding advice will come forward, but it will be more nuanced and targeted than in the past.

I recognise the Member's frustration that she does not have all the answers. I will share something with her: I do not have all the answers. We are dealing at speed with a pandemic. A man sitting in front of her will tell her what it is like to work at speed. We are trying to work through all the answers, and the reason that I came to the Chamber was to give Members a heads-up that this is the direction of travel. We will have the guidance, regulations and, hopefully, all the answers in place before Friday.

In answer to the Member's specific question, six o'clock on Friday is the target for when these regulations will take effect.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the First Minister for giving us this update. No one is in any doubt about the extraordinary circumstances that we find ourselves in and the fact that the Executive are having to work at pace. The statement does not make the purpose clear: will the First Minister make it clear? Although I welcome the action that is being taken today — it is absolutely essential given the skyrocketing incidence of the virus — the purpose of today's actions and the further restrictions is not to beat the virus in the short term, because it will not do that. It is important that people do not think that, in four weeks' time, the virus will go away and it will be OK by Christmas. The blunt truth is that this is about buying time for our health service, in order for it not to be overwhelmed. Will the First Minister confirm that? Will she also agree that it would help to assure the public of the purpose of the action if the full,

detailed guidance from the CMO and the Chief Scientific Adviser were published?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. What we are trying to do, as we have always tried to do, is push down transmission of the virus and get the R number below 1. At the minute, it is about 1.5. That is what this targeted intervention is designed to do. It is also designed to make sure that the capacity of our hospitals is able to cope with what comes in. We are also trying to minimise deaths. We set out those priorities in March, and those three priorities were to the fore.

When, in four weeks' time, we come back to the situation, ideally we want to see that the R number is below 1. Then we can lift the restrictions and then we will continue to have to do all the basic things — social distancing and handwashing — to keep the virus under control in that fashion. We have to take these interventions now because the virus has gone out of control in some places. I very much regret having to do this. I come to the House to do it with no joy at all. We are interfering with people's lives, their ability to make money so that they can live, and we then have to try to support those people. That is what we have to focus on in the coming days.

Ms S Bradley: The statement relies heavily on calls for responsible behaviour from all. I wholeheartedly support that, but further to Mr Nesbitt's question earlier, will extra resources or support be provided to all those who are assisted and charged with carrying out enforcement duties?

Mrs Foster: We will continue to work with those people who want to help us on compliance and enforcement of the regulations. We are working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, with local government environmental health officers and with the Health and Safety Executive on other issues.

To go back to the Member's first point, personal responsibility is a wonderful thing. We have all been given free will, but I hope that people listening today will realise that if they do what we are asking them to do then it has a consequence and will help us get the virus under control. I can make all the restrictions I want, but if people are not prepared to comply with them we are going to have a really serious problem in a couple of weeks' time. I do not want to be in that place. I urge all Members to work with us so that we can deal with this terrible situation that we find ourselves in.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the First Minister for her answers. There are still concerns around schools, First Minister. In the event that pupils have to be educated at home, will the two-week timeframe be used constructively by the Education Minister and others to ensure support for children and young people from more deprived communities who do not have access to technology and to printing of papers etc? Will additional support measures be given to those families, in a very targeted way?

Mrs Foster: The Member makes a very relevant point. When our schools are closed it is the children whom she referred to who suffer. It is those children who do not have access to the internet, who do not have Wi-Fi and who, perhaps, have parents who are not that interested in education. The usual line is, "If it was good enough for me, it's good enough for you", which, frankly, is not good enough.

We need to make sure that our young people are in schools, because then they get the attention that they need from their teachers and peers. I really appeal to people to think about this. We need our young people in school, especially our vulnerable young people. It is a terrible thing to say, but for some of our vulnerable young people the safest place for them is school — it is not in their homes. Therefore, to me, this is an absolute priority and we have to ensure that our young people have schools and safe places to go to and can then develop as the young people we want them to be.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes questions on the statement. Thank you to all who contributed this morning and I thank the First Minister and the Minister of Health for attending.

Adjourned at 11.43 am.

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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The Executive Office

COVID-19: Localised Restrictions

Published on Thursday 1 October 2020.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are writing to provide Members with an update on the course of the Coronavirus epidemic and recent decisions that we as First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with the Northern Ireland Executive, have taken to limit its spread in the Derry City and Strabane District Council through the introduction of further localised restrictions.

Amendments to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 published on 30 September imposed increased restrictions on venues where alcohol may be consumed across Northern Ireland.

A decision was made at the Executive today that further increased restrictions are required in the Derry City and Strabane District Council as a result of an alarming increase in the incidence rate of the virus in this area.

On 29 September, just two days ago, a statement was made on additional restrictions to the hospitality industry as a result of the increasing confirmed COVID-19 cases.

These were presented in the context of the backdrop against which decisions in relation to the hospitality restrictions had been made and it sent a stark message – transmission rates of the COVID-19 virus through household contacts and informal interactions in the community are increasing significantly.

The increase in the number of confirmed positive cases is not because more tests are taking place. As the Health Minister and the Chief Medical Advisor said in their media statement yesterday, the increase we see in confirmed cases is because the transmission rate has increased and is continuing to increase.

Since the statement made to the Assembly on Tuesday:

- There has been a further increase in the daily number of people tested positive. Yesterday the number was 424.
- Unfortunately, there have also been 2 further deaths bringing the death toll to 581.
- Yesterday, there were 70 Covid patients in hospitals across Northern Ireland, with nine in intensive care. This brings the number of hospital patients to nearly 25% of peak levels during wave 1.

There is evidence of widespread community transmission in several parts of Northern Ireland.

However and of great concern, the Derry City and Strabane District Council has an incidence of 323 new Covid-19 cases per 100,000 population as of yesterday afternoon. This compares with an incidence of 133 cases per 100,000 population in Belfast, the next highest area of incidence.

If allowed to continue this will inevitably lead to an increase in hospital admissions and deaths, which we must try to minimise. This is a cause for alarm and for definitive action to be taken.

Given the clear evidence of significant and continuing community transmission, and the proximity to Donegal where additional restrictions are already in place, the Executive has agreed to introduce a range of additional restrictions in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area as soon as practically possible.

This decision has not been taken lightly but is considered necessary and proportionate to reduce the accelerating transmission of the virus in this area.

A number of measures will be imposed by regulations. Those are that:

- No indoor gatherings should take place where people from different households are mixed, with certain exemptions in place for: weddings, wedding receptions, funerals and post funeral gatherings (existing restrictions and strict social distancing requirements continue to apply); services of worship in places of worship; indoor sport for individual training only (e.g. no exercise classes); workplaces where working from home is not possible; educational settings; managed youth and childcare services.
- Hospitality venues can remain open for take-away, delivery and outdoor dining only. Wet pubs can serve customers outdoors only. Existing restrictions for outdoor settings will continue to apply. Hotels can only provide services to residents as per previous restrictions. A support package for affected venues will be brought forward.
- All museums, galleries and cultural attractions must remain closed and libraries can operate a call and collect service.
- Outdoor gatherings are permitted, up to a maximum of 15 people only. There cannot be gatherings of more than 15 people even with a risk assessment.
- Sports training and sporting events are exempt but they must take place without any spectators.

These restrictions will be in place for a time limited period of a minimum of two weeks, and will be reviewed weekly.

In addition, the following measures are recommended in guidance:

- People living in Derry and Strabane local government district area are required to avoid all unnecessary travel. Similarly, people should only travel to the area where it is absolutely necessary.
- People working in the Derry City and Strabane District Council should continue to work from home where possible.
- Schools, Early Learning and Childcare services in the local government district area will remain open.
- Adult and Higher Education Institutions will also stay open. Managed youth settings will remain open. However, in these settings, protective measures should be reviewed and steps should be taken to limit congregation as much as possible.
- People are asked to walk, cycle or use private transport, shared only with members of their household where possible. Where public transport is taken, social distancing should be observed and face coverings should be worn.

Guidance will be provided to people living in the Derry City and Strabane District Council – this is advice they are strongly urged to follow to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

The additional measures proposed for the Derry City and Strabane District Council complement those imposed in Donegal since the 28th of September– what happens in Donegal impacts on the Derry City and Strabane District Council area and vice versa.

The restrictions will be in place for two weeks in the first instance, and will be reviewed on a weekly basis.

The Executive recognises that this will have an adverse impact on businesses and the local economy and is planning a support package, the details of which will be announced as soon as possible. We will also be making further representations to the Treasury on the need for greater support measures for our economy.

We know that localised restrictions are an established method of suppressing the virus. Returning to the previous lockdown is not where any of us want to go and that means taking effective localised action now.

The restrictions announced today will be kept under active review and will stay in place no longer than is necessary.

In addition, the level of fines for breaching the restrictions in place, not just in Derry City and Strabane District Council but across Northern Ireland is under review. The outcome of this will be made available presently.

This is a tough time for everyone and the Executive is conscious of the toll it is taking on our society, particularly those who will be the subject of the enhanced restrictions. However, we all know that doing nothing is not an option – we have to protect our fellow citizens and our health service.

We repeat the simple message made on Tuesday to the Assembly - if each and every one of us does our bit we will

help bring the epidemic to an end sooner rather than later and by doing that, save lives.

A key aspect is complying with the measures that are put in place to help curb the spread of the virus.

Department of Health

COVID-19 — Update

Published at 4.30 pm on Friday 2 October 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): This written statement provides an update to Members on the escalating situation regarding the prevalence of the Coronavirus in Northern Ireland and the measures being taken by my Department and the Executive to protect the public.

Over the past week, the scale of the unfolding challenges we are facing have been graphically underlined by the figures published daily on my Department's Covid-19 dashboard. The figures today are particularly concerning.

Unfortunately, the warnings about the resurgent Covid-19 threat are coming true in the starkest of terms.

Over the last week, there has been an unprecedented increase in cases in the context of stable testing along with a progressive rise in COVID hospital patients.

There has been an increase in ICU occupancy and in the context of the increase in hospital admissions and inpatients, it is the clear opinion of the Chief Scientific Advisor that we have now moved beyond the lag period between increased case and pressure on the health and social care system. Cases are currently doubling every 9 days and hospital admissions every 13 days.

As I said in the media briefing on Wednesday and I as told the Health Committee on Thursday, if the current trends do not change in 3-6 weeks' time hospital inpatient numbers will exceed those witnessed during the first wave. Some of our hospitals are already having to switch on their surge plans.

The Executive has agreed a number of interventions to disrupt the spread of the virus.

Strict restrictions are in place across Northern Ireland on household gatherings, and a new province wide 11pm curfew for licensed premises has been introduced.

In response to a rapid and sustained increase in cases in the Derry City and Strabane Council area, the Executive yesterday announced far-reaching localised restrictions for that local government district.

My Department continues to assess further potential interventions should they be required.

Public compliance with public health guidance is critical at this point.

Regulations and enforcement alone will not halt this developing crisis. I would ask every Member to do everything in their power to ensure their constituents follow the advice and guidance from my Department.

Earlier today I attended a sectoral meeting of the North South Ministerial Council and along with our Chief Medical Officer met with Ireland's Minister of Health Stephen Donnelly and Acting Chief Medical Officer Dr Ronan Glynn. The meeting provided a useful opportunity to once again confirm our ongoing commitment close cooperation, especially as the transmission of this virus recognises no border.

Similarly, yesterday evening I attended a 4 UK Nation Covid-O meeting during which further decisions were taken on international travel regulations.

Members should note that further amendments will now be made to the Regulations to give effect to new changes to the Travel Corridor list. I am removing Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba, Poland and Turkey from the exemption list following an increase in risk rating.

All changes will come into force at 4am on Saturday 3rd October 2020 in line with agreed changes to the Travel Corridor exemption list.

Yesterday, I was pleased to announce that a new version of the StopCovid NI app has gone live and can now be downloaded by 11-17 year olds.

This is an important enhancement to an already vital initiative.

The StopCovid NI app was launched at the end of July and the number of downloads has now surpassed the 400,000 mark.

The first version of the app was for the 18 plus age group. Since then, meetings have been held with the Commissioner for Children & Young People, the Information Commissioner's Office and representatives from the Children's Law Centre, in order to ensure appropriate and safe access to the app for younger people, within the legal constraints of GDPR and safeguarding.

This has now been successfully achieved, meaning Northern Ireland now has what is believed to be the first proximity app in the world of this kind.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

£1.7M Further COVID-19 Support for the Sea Fish Catching Sector

Published at 2.00 pm on Monday 5 October 2020.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):

- 1 I wish to make a written statement to the Assembly to advise Members of my decision to provide a further £1.7m COVID-19 financial support to the sea fish catching sector, which continues to feel the impact of lost markets and lower prices as a result of COVID 19.
- 2 In April, I allocated £1.5 million emergency support to Northern Ireland's fleet to enable them to deal with the immediate impacts of the pandemic. The fleet continues to feel the adverse impacts of the pandemic with significantly reduced markets that are predicted to remain depressed for the remainder of this year.
- 3 I have therefore allocated a further £1.7 million for our full-time fishing fleet, bringing the total amount of support over this year to £3.2 million. This is the most far-reaching support package anywhere in the UK and I am proud to support our local fishing industry.
- 4 This latest support has been developed in discussions between industry representatives and my officials and helps to address the ongoing issues of over-supply and low prices whilst still allowing the fleet to respond to market demands as export markets and the hospitality sector continue to recover.
- 5 The assistance will be provided in two parts to, the trawling and dredging sector, and the potting sector respectively.

Trawl and dredge sector (£1.3m)

- 6 Over the next week, all owners of NI registered trawlers and dredgers, will be contacted by the Department and invited to apply for assistance. The mobile gear scheme is being funded through the Temporary Cessation Measure of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.
- 7 Since the announcement of the earlier sea fishing support scheme in April the European Union amended Article 33 of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund to allow it to be used for COVID 19 support. The governance arrangements for this element of the funding will be those that apply to the delivery of the EMFF.

Potting sector (£0.4m)

- 8 Due the seasonal nature of potting for shellfish the EMFF Temporary Cessation Measure is not deemed appropriate and the Static Gear Scheme will be supported through national resources. Owners of vessels that exclusively use static gear will be contacted towards the end of this month.

- 9 This scheme is smaller in value (less than £400k) and will be based on fixed costs. It will operate in a similar way to the scheme provided to the fishing sector earlier this year. However this time costs will be based on actual fixed costs rather than banding based on average fixed costs. There is still some work to do on this element of the scheme including seeking Department of Finance approval. I believe that given the relatively low cost of the fixed cost scheme and the availability of funding, this should be a relatively straightforward process. This element will also require a legislative scheme that must be made jointly with DoF.
- 10 Similar governance arrangements will be put in place for the fixed cost element as were introduced for the previous fixed cost support.
- 11 In the coming weeks I intend to bring forward legislation to the Assembly to enable the delivery of the potting sector scheme.

Eligibility

- 12 For both elements of the funding support, eligibility criteria will apply in order to ensure the benefits provided accrue to the Northern Ireland commercial fishing fleet, address identified need, and provide value for money. These are:
 - a vessel must be NI registered and have a home port within Northern Ireland
 - the vessel for which financial assistance is being sought must have fished for at least 120 days in the preceding 24 months.
 - a vessel must have generated sales of at least £10k during 2019.
 - a vessel must have a track record of fishing in the period for which of support is being sought during 2019, and.
 - a vessel must provide its most recent three years financial accounts as part of the application process in order to calculate the appropriate level of financial assistance.

Conclusion

- 13 This remains a challenging time for our fishing fleet due to COVID-19 and I hope that the proposed support will demonstrate my Department's commitment to, and confidence in, the long-term future of the local industry and help position it to grasp the opportunities that will come during 2021.
- 14 I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my Executive colleagues for their continued support in my efforts to support the fishing industry and coastal communities at this difficult time.

Department of Health

COVID-19 — Update

Published at 4.30 pm on Friday 9 October 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): This statement summarises the current situation regarding the ongoing and rapid increase of positive Coronavirus cases in Northern Ireland.

Today, my Department's daily Covid-19 dashboard reports for the first time that more than 1,000 additional positive tests have been recorded. The number of additional tests undertaken in a day has passed the 10,000 mark, also for the first time.

In his weekly R number report to the Executive, the Chief Scientific Advisor Professor Ian Young informed the Minister that R remains clearly above 1, both for new positive tests and hospital inpatients.

He stated that the current estimate of R for both these categories is between 1.3 and 1.8.

Over the last week, there has been a further marked 100% increase in cases in the context of a moderate 15% increase in testing.

There has been a progressive rise in COVID hospital patients, which are now around 33% of peak levels during wave 1. This trend is expected to become more pronounced in the very near future in the light of the sustained spike in new cases.

We have now moved beyond the lag period between increased case and pressure on the health and social care system. Cases are currently doubling every 7 days and hospital admissions every 9 days, both reduced from last week; if current trends remain unabated hospital inpatients will exceed those of wave 1 in only 2 to 3 weeks.

The situation is grave and getting more so, on a daily if not hourly basis.

Significant restrictions on household contacts remain in place across Northern Ireland, while more stringent limits currently in the Derry City and Strabane Local Government District.

I am advised that further restrictions for Northern Ireland are likely to be required in the very near future, in the event of positive cases continuing their current upward trajectory. This will be necessary to reduce hospitalisations and loss of life and to protect our health and social care system from being overwhelmed.

Unfortunately, as has been stated, the seasons are not in our favour, as winter leaves health and social care at its most fragile every year.

Like other Members, I wish that our health and social care services had greater in-built resilience and additional capacity.

It is without doubt that ten years of budgetary pressures have taken a toll on the system and its capacity. We cannot roll the clock back however – we have to deal with the situation now staring us in the face.

The Executive is taking a major stocktake of the options at its disposal, quite properly taking into account the wider societal and economic consequences of any further restrictions.

The Executive is in effect in a double bind – wanting to protect our citizens and hospitals from the virus while seeking to prevent lasting and widespread economic damage, with all the implications that will bring for the well-being of individuals and communities.

It is my view that this is the single biggest challenge facing our Executive and Assembly in the modern era of devolution.

This week I announced that the Workforce Appeal to boost health and social care staff numbers to assist in the battle against Covid-19 has resumed.

The initial appeal in March saw 1,702 doctors, nurses and other staff successful in their application to work for the health service.

I commend all those who came forward and continue to come forward, and once again thank everyone working across the system for their dedication at this time.

I know Members will agree with me that every one of us across society owes it to our health service and its staff to do everything in power to break the chains of transmission of Covid-19.

Keeping our distance, reducing our contacts as much as possible, wearing a mask and washing our hands is still our best collective defence mechanism against this silent enemy.

Department of Health

COVID-19: UPDATE

Published at 5.00 pm on Friday 16 October 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Unfortunately in this weekly update to Members I have to report that there has been a further marked increase in cases, once again far outstripping the increase in testing. The current estimate of R, for both hospital inpatients and new positive tests, is in the range of 1.4-1.8.

There has been a significant increase in Covid inpatient admissions and ICU occupancy which now sits at 213 and 26. A month ago those respective figures were 21 and 4. We are now already at over half of the peak hospitalisations during wave 1.

In the context of the increase in hospital admissions and inpatients it is the clear opinion of the Chief Scientific Advisor that we have now moved beyond the lag period between increased case and pressure on the health and social care system.

Cases are currently doubling every 10 days and hospital admissions every 9 days; if current trends remain unabated hospital inpatients will exceed those of wave 1 in 1-2 weeks and ICU inpatients will exceed wave 1 shortly afterwards.

There are some early indications that the previous Northern Ireland wide restrictions are beginning to make an impact. Absolute levels of incidence and prevalence remain deeply concerning however and are still among the highest in Europe.

The Executive has agreed a range of significant time-bound interventions to curb the spread of Covid-19 in Northern Ireland. I do not underestimate the impact on the restrictions that are shortly to come into effect. The clear scientific and medical advice was however we needed to take immediate and decisive action to slow the spread of this virus.

With rising numbers of Covid positive in-patients and significant numbers of staff self-isolating, all HSC Trusts are experiencing pressures in Emergency Departments (EDs). Primary Care clinicians are also reporting rising numbers of patients presenting to general practice with urgent care needs. Prior to COVID-19, there was clear evidence that our urgent and emergency care services were under increasing pressure. Growing numbers of people were experiencing long waits to be seen in overcrowded EDs.

This was already an unsustainable position that required radical transformation. However, the impact of COVID-19, and the accompanying focus on infection prevention and social distancing, has driven home the urgency with which we need to make these changes. To protect our patients and staff, we cannot allow our EDs or hospitals to continue to see this level of crowding in future. Immediate changes need to be implemented to allow our urgent and emergency care services to operate safely through this crisis.

I can now confirm to Members that officials and clinicians have developed the Department's response plan. This focuses on ten key actions that will be rapidly implemented in order to ensure that urgent and emergency care services across primary and secondary care can be maintained and improved in an environment that is safe for patients and for staff. The measures are focused on:

- Structured collaboration between primary and secondary care
- Working towards a 'phone first' model to improve access to clinical advice and reduce unnecessary attendance at Emergency Departments
- Scheduling urgent care through appointments to reduce waiting room overcrowding and waits for treatment
- Avoiding unnecessary admission to hospital
- Timely discharge from hospital

These actions will support the development of an enhanced range of safe and effective elective and unscheduled care services to patients which do not rely on patients presenting at an ED. The underlying intention of all of the actions is to make sure patients can access the care they need, in the right setting, as quickly as possible. A copy of the response plan is available on the Department's website.

Committee Stages

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Justice

1 October 2020

Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill [NIA 03/17-22]

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Ms Linda Dillon (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie
Ms Sinéad Bradley
Ms Jemma Dolan
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Paul Frew
Ms Emma Rogan
Miss Rachel Woods

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): I refer members to the relevant papers in the meeting pack. Those include the Clerk's memo, which sets out the Committee's position following its deliberations on the clauses during meetings of 10, 17 and 24 September and the text of a range of amendments provided by the Department of Justice.

We will now go through the formal clause-by-clause consideration of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill and the proposed amendments. I will proceed through the clauses in the order that they appear and put the Questions formally. I advise members that, where there are amendments to a clause, I will put the Question on the amendment first. Where no amendments have been proposed and no issues highlighted, I will seek the agreement of the Committee to group those clauses when putting the Question. The Question on each amendment that introduces a new clause will be put at the relevant point. If members are clear on how we will go through this, I will proceed. Forgive me if I take a little bit of time to make sure that I get it right.

Clauses 1 to 4 are "The domestic abuse offence", "What amounts to abusive behaviour", "Impact of behaviour on victim" and "Meaning of behaviour" and how it can be carried out. Are members content to group clauses 1 to 4 for the purposes of putting the Question?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with clauses 1 to 4, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 5, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Clauses 6 and 7 are "Establishing connection by notice" and "How notice is to be served".

Question, That the Committee is content with clauses 6 and 7, put and agreed to.

Clause 8 (Aggravation where victim is under 18)

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Department provided the text of a proposed amendment to tidy up the wording of this clause. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Minister to clause 8?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 9 (Aggravation where relevant child is involved)

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Committee considered the proposed amendment by the Department to amend the child cruelty offence in section 20 of the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1968 when considering this clause. The Question on that amendment will be put after the Question on clause 20. That is where it appears.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 9, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Rachel is indicating that she does not agree. Others are agreed.

Mr Frew: Of course, the caveat to that, Chair, is the amendment to the explanatory and financial memorandum.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Yes.

Clause 10 (Behaviour occurring outside the UK)

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Department provided the text of a proposed amendment to tidy up the wording of this clause. Is the Committee content with the amendment that was proposed by the Minister to clause 10?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 11 (Exception where responsibility for children)

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Department has highlighted that the child cruelty offence in the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1968 applies

only to those under the age of 16. In order to ensure that non-physical abuse of 16- and 17-year-olds in a parent-child relationship is clearly provided for in legislation, the Department indicated that it would welcome the views of the Committee on possible amendments to clauses 11 and 17 to reduce the age threshold for the parental responsibility exclusion from under age 18 to under age 16. The Department outlined that, in the absence of this, it may not be possible to address the non-physical ill treatment of those aged 16 and 17 in this context.

Earlier in the meeting, members agreed that they had not had time to properly consider this proposed change or to clearly understand any implications or consequences of it. Therefore, the Committee agreed to note the potential amendments from the Minister.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 11, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 12, put and agreed to.

Clause 13 (Alternative available for conviction)

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Department provided the text of a proposed amendment that would insert provision, for the avoidance of doubt, as to the effect of the Criminal Law Act 1967 to make sure that there is no risk of implying that the provisions in the 1967 Act are ousted by what is contained in clause 13. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Minister to clause 13?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 14, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clauses 15 and 16, put and agreed to.

Clause 17 (Exception regarding the aggravation)

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The circumstances relating to clause 11 also apply to clause 17, and the Committee has noted the potential amendments by the Minister.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 17, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 18, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clauses 19 and 20, put and agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Members, next is the new provision to amend the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1968. The Department has provided the text of a proposed amendment to amend the child cruelty offence in section 20 of the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1968 to ensure that non-physical ill treatment of a child by someone with parental responsibility for them is criminalised. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Minister to insert a new clause to amend the child cruelty offence in section 20 of the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1968?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Members, when a new clause is added to a Bill, we need to recommend that to the Assembly. So, the Question is that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the proposed new clause be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clauses 21 to 24, put and agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): This is a new clause to provide powers for the Department for measures to protect and support the victim or alleged victim. The Committee has agreed to table an amendment to provide for the Department to make provision for measures to protect and support the victim or alleged victim by way of regulations within 24 months of commencement of the Act, similar to domestic abuse protection notices and orders. Is the Committee content with the amendment to insert a new clause to provide powers to the Department to make provision for such measures?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Again, the Question is that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the new clause be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 25 (Guidance about domestic abuse)

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Department has provided the text of its proposed amendment to change the word "may" to "must", as requested by the Committee. The Committee has agreed to table an amendment to enable the Department to make, by way of regulations, provision for informing the school of a child who saw, heard or was present during a domestic abuse incident. Is the Committee content with the proposed amendment by the Minister to clause 25?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): This is the new provision to provide for the Department to issue guidance on the data to be collected. I remind members that the Committee agreed to table an amendment for the Department to issue guidance on the data to be collected. Is the Committee content with the amendment to insert a new clause regarding guidance on data collection?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Once more, the Question is that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the proposed new clause be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): There is a new provision to place a duty on the Department regarding training. The

Committee has agreed to bring forward an amendment to place a duty on the Department in relation to training for the effective operation of the legislation. Is the Committee content with the amendment to insert a new clause to place a duty on the Department regarding training for the effective operation of the Act?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Question is that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the proposed new clause be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): There is a new provision to provide for independent oversight of Part 1 of the Act. The Committee has agreed to bring forward an amendment to provide for the appointment of an independent person to oversee the implementation of Part 1 of the Act. Is the Committee content with the amendment to insert a new clause to make provision for the appointment of an independent person to review, report and make recommendations in relation to the operation of Part 1 of the Act as drafted?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Question is that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the proposed new clause be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): There is a new provision to require the Department of Justice to report on the operation of the Act. The Committee has agreed to table an amendment to require the Department of Justice to report on the operation of the Act at intervals of three years and to publish and lay the report in the Assembly. Is the Committee content with the amendment to insert a new clause to require the Department of Justice to report on the operation of the Act as drafted?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Question is that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the proposed new clause be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): There is a new provision to amend article 12A of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. The Department has provided the text of a proposed amendment to amend article 12A of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 so that a court considering an application for a contact or residency order will be specifically required to have regard to the conviction of the party applying for the order for the new domestic abuse offence where the child aggravator has been applied. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Minister to insert new clause A26 to amend article 12A of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 in relation to factors relevant to residents and contact orders?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Question is that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the proposed new clause be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 26 (Prohibition of cross-examination in person)

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Department has provided the text of a proposed amendment to correct a small error that occurred when the Bill was being processed prior to introduction. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Minister to clause 26?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Department has provided the text of a proposed amendment to insert a new clause to provide for court rules to make provision so that victims of domestic abuse are automatically eligible for consideration of special measures in family proceedings. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Minister to insert new clause 26A to provide for court rules for special measures in family proceedings?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Question is that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that proposed new clause 26A be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): There are new provisions for cross-examination in person in civil proceedings generally. The Department has provided the text of a proposed amendment to introduce a new provision to provide for a court hearing civil proceedings to have a discretionary power to prohibit cross-examination in person and to require a court considering whether to exercise its discretionary power to prohibit cross-examination in person to have regard to findings of fact made in civil or criminal proceedings as well as family proceedings. Is the Committee is content with the amendment proposed by the Minister to insert new clause 26B to provide for prohibition of cross-examination in person in civil proceedings generally?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Question is that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that proposed new clause 26B be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): There are new provisions to provide for court rules for special measures in civil proceedings. The Department has provided the text of a proposed amendment to insert a new clause to provide for court rules to make provision so that victims of domestic abuse are automatically eligible for consideration of special measures in civil proceedings. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Minister to

insert new clause 26C to provide for court rules for special measures in family proceedings?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The Question is that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that proposed new clause 26C be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 27, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 28, put and agreed to.

Long Title

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): As this is the end of the clause-by-clause consideration, the Committee can now consider the long title.

Question, That the Committee is content with the long title, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): That concludes the formal clause-by-clause consideration of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. Members, thank you for your cooperation and work on this.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Finance

14 October 2020

Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 01/17-22]

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Dr Steve Aiken (Chairperson)
Mr Paul Frew (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Pat Catney
Ms Jemma Dolan
Mr Philip McGuigan
Mr Maoliosa McHugh
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Jim Wells

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Ladies and gentlemen, we now move to the next item on the agenda, which is the formal clause-by-clause consideration of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. I want to inform Members that the session is being recorded by Hansard. I remind members that the formal clause-by-clause stage is an essential part of the Committee's duties and is needed for the preparation of the Committee's report. I advise members that the Committee will proceed through the clauses, and I will put the Questions formally. I remind members that, during formal clause-by-clause consideration, deliberations or discussions on clauses have now concluded. I inform members that, where there are amendments, the Question on the amendment will be put first, and the Question on each amendment that introduces a new clause to the Bill will be put at the relevant point. Please bear with me.

Clause 1 (Amendment of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2013)

The Bill's sponsor has proposed one technical amendment to clause 1(2). Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Bill's sponsor to clause 1(2)? Agreed?

Mr McGuigan: I am not content.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Sorry? You need to speak up.

Mr McGuigan: I am not content.

Mr McHugh: Are these the amendments to the clause, or the clause?

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): The amendments.

Mr McHugh: In our case, we do not really have to vote on the amendment, because we actually are voting against

the clause itself. It is immaterial whether we vote on the amendment or not. Is that correct?

The Committee Clerk: Chair, do you want to put the Question again?

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Yes. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Bill's sponsor to clause 1(2)?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Two amendments have been proposed by the Bill's sponsor to clause 1(3) to retain the principle that a Minister should be responsible for the conduct of their special adviser. The Bill's sponsor has proposed one further amendment at page 1, line 14 to reinsert a previous process for special adviser appointments which was contained in the previous code of appointments but removed from the revised code.

I will put the first Question. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Bill's sponsor to clause 1(3) at page 1, line 12?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Bill's sponsor to clause 1(3) at page 1, line 13?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Bill's sponsor to clause 1(3) at page 1, line 14?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): We will move on to clause 1(4). As there are no proposed amendments to this subsection, it will be considered as part of clause 1 overall.

There are no proposed amendments to clause 1(5), so it will be considered as part of clause 1 overall.

I advise members that the Bill's sponsor has proposed an amendment to clause 1(6) at page 2, line 9 to make it clear that the subsection applies specifically to special advisers. The Bill's sponsor has also proposed a technical amendment at page 2, line 12.

I will put the Question. Is the Committee content with the proposed amendments to clause 1(6)?

Members indicated assent.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 2 (Amendment of the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999)

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I advise members that the Bill's sponsor has proposed two amendments to clause 2 to change the approach to achieving the objective of reducing the number of special advisers in the Executive Office from eight to four. The Bill's sponsor has proposed an amendment at page 2, line 18 to change the wording of the Bill so that the First Minister and deputy First Minister may appoint two special advisers each. That number currently stands at three each and the proposal in the Bill, as drafted, was for one each, with one special adviser for each of the junior Ministers. The Bill's sponsor has also proposed an amendment at page 2, line 19 to remove the facility for junior Ministers to appoint special advisers.

I inform members that there was a higher level of consensus in the Committee on the amendment that applies to junior Ministers than there was on the amendment that applies to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is, therefore, suggested that the Committee should consider the amendment to remove the facility for junior Ministers to appoint special advisers before considering the amendment on the number of special advisers overall. Are members content with that approach?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I will put the Question. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Bill's sponsor to clause 2 at page 2, line 19?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Bill sponsor to clause 2, page 2, line 18?

Members indicated assent.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments.

The Committee divided: Ayes 4; Noes 3; Abstentions 2.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Frew, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Abstentions

Mr Catney, Mr O'Toole.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question put, That the Committee is content with clause 3.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 4 (Special Advisers in the Executive Office)

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I advise members that the Bill's sponsor is proposing one technical amendment to clause 4. Is the Committee content with the amendment to clause 4 proposed by the Bill's sponsor?

Members indicated assent.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment.

The Committee divided: Ayes 4; Noes 3; Abstentions 2.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Frew, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Abstentions

Mr Catney, Mr O'Toole.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 5 (Amendment of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.)

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I advise members that the Bill's sponsor is proposing three amendments to clause 5 as follows: page 3, line 4, to provide protection for MLAs and Ministers against vexatious complaints; page 3, line 11, to reduce provisions in the Bill in relation to the ministerial code; page 3, line 14, to add Ministers to the ambit of the Commissioner for Standards.

Is the Committee content with the amendments proposed by the Bill sponsor to clause 5?

Members indicated assent.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 6 (Records of meetings)

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I advise members that the Bill's sponsor is proposing one amendment to clause 6

to reduce the burden of what must be recorded. Is the Committee content with the proposed amendment to clause 6?

Members indicated assent.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment.

The Committee divided: Ayes 4; Noes 3; Abstentions 2.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Frew, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Abstentions

Mr Catney, Mr O'Toole.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question put, That the Committee is content with clause 7.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 8 (Presence of civil servants)

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I advise members that the Bill's sponsor is proposing one amendment to clause 8 to adjust the wording of the clause to make it more compatible with terms used elsewhere in the Bill. Is the Committee content with the amendment proposed by the Bill sponsor to clause 8?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Wells: Was that one against, or three?

Mr McHugh: That was just the amendment.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Yes, that was just the amendment. We are doing the clause now.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Ah, Maolíosa. Well done.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Is the Committee content to note new clause 8A?

Mr McGuigan: Are you proposing that we note clause 8A?

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I did not say that. I asked whether the Committee is content to note clause 8A, yes.

Mr O'Toole: So the vote is on whether we are content to note, rather than —?

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Yes.

Mr McGuigan: Can I ask, for clarification —.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): We did not formally consider the evidence for clause 8A.

Mr McGuigan: So voting against noting it does what?

Mr Catney: That we have noted it?

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): That you have noted it.

The Clerk Of Bills: It is simply that it is put, so that the Committee can just —. If you note an amendment or you are not taking a view for or against — that is simply because, as the Chair pointed out, the due evidence was not received as it was not part of the Bill —.

Mr McGuigan: So whether we note it or take no action is primarily irrelevant?

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): But it is recorded that you voted against noting it, if you so wish.

Mr McGuigan: Fair enough.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Are we content?

Mr Catney: Have we taken that vote?

The Committee Clerk: Was there a formal vote?

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Is the Committee content to note new clause 8A?

Question put, That the Committee is content with the new clause.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 9 (Use of official systems)

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): The Bill's sponsor is proposing one amendment to clause 9 to change the focus from the use of non-official systems per se to the failure to record the use of non-official systems within a reasonable time period, and to introduce reasonable behaviour and public interest defence. Is the Committee content with the amendment to clause 9 proposed by the Bill sponsor?

Members indicated assent.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment.

The Committee divided: Ayes 4; Noes 5.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Frew, Mr Wells.

Noes

Mr Catney, Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr O'Toole.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr McHugh: What was that vote?

Mr Frew: Clause 9.

Mr McHugh: What was the total of that vote?

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): 5-4.

Mr McHugh: 5-4.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): But remember, this is a process whereby we are saying that we have voted on this for Consideration Stage.

Mr Allister: I think he asked what was the result.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): All right, sorry; 5-4.

Clause 10 (Register of interests)

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I advise members that the Bill's sponsor is proposing two amendments to clause 10 to align it with the relevant code of conduct provisions. The sponsor is also proposing one further amendment to clause 10 to include a definition of family members.

Is the Committee content with the amendments to clause 10 proposed by the Bill's sponsor?

Members indicated assent.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 11 (Offence of unauthorised disclosure)

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I advise members that the Bill's sponsor is proposing one amendment to clause 11 to simplify the language, to protect FOI obligations and internal government communications, to introduce reasonable behaviour and public interest defence, and to introduce a maximum sentence of two years rather than five years as proposed in the Bill as drafted.

Is the Committee content with the amendment to clause 11 proposed by the Bill sponsor?

Question put, That the Committee is content with the proposed amendment.

Ayes 4; Noes 5.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Frew, Mr Wells.

Noes

Mr Catney, Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr O'Toole.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment.

The Committee divided: Ayes 4; Noes 5.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Frew, Mr Wells.

Noes

Mr Catney, Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr O'Toole.

Question accordingly negatived.

The Clerk Of Bills: Can I just intervene? If there are more members against the clause as amended, do you want to do the clause as drafted for that particular one, if the Committee has a different view on it? Five members were not content with the amendment.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I will ask whether the Committee is content with clause 11 as drafted.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause.

The Committee divided: Ayes 2; Noes 5; Abstentions 2.

Ayes

Mr Allister, Mr Wells.

Noes

Mr Catney, Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr O'Toole.

Abstentions

Dr Aiken, Mr Frew.

Question accordingly negatived.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Claire, does that clarify the point?

The Clerk Of Bills: Yes. I noticed that the number of noes was greater for the amendments to clauses 9 and 11.

The Committee Clerk: If there was a similar situation with clause 9, you may want to go back and revisit it as drafted.

Question put, That the Committee is content with clause 9.

The Committee divided: Ayes 3; Noes 5; Abstentions 1.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Wells.

Noes

Mr Catney, Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr O'Toole.

Abstentions

Mr Frew.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 12 (Biennial report)

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I advise members that the Bill's sponsor is proposing one technical amendment to clause 12. Is the Committee content with the sponsor's proposed amendment to clause 12?

Members indicated assent.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Mr Catney: Chair, have you noted new clause 11A?

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): That will be done at the end.

Question put, That the Committee is content with clause 13.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 14 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): I advise members that the sponsor is proposing an amendment to clause 14 to provide a definition of "family member". The Bill's sponsor is proposing a further amendment to clause 14 to provide a definition of "department". Is the Committee content with the Bill sponsor's proposed amendments to clause 14?

Members indicated assent.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question put, That the Committee is content with clause 15.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Mr Wells: How can you vote against a title? That seems daft. It is either a title or it is not.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Thank you for your remarks. They are duly noted, Mr Wells, the honourable Member for South Down.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the schedule.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the long title.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Catney, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Mr Wells: Surely not. *[Laughter.]*

Question accordingly agreed to.

New Clause

The Committee Clerk: Sorry, Chair. New clause 11A should have been at the end there, but it seems to have been omitted from the Chair's brief.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the new clause.

The Committee divided: Ayes 5; Noes 3.

Ayes

Dr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Frew, Mr O'Toole, Mr Wells.

Noes

Ms Dolan, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Claire, before I bring the session to an end, have we done what we are supposed to have done?

The Clerk Of Bills: Yes.

The Chairperson (Dr Aiken): Thank you very much indeed, members. Claire, thank you very much indeed for your forbearance and support. I thank the Committee for speeding the Bill through its passage.

Written Answers

This section contains the written answers to questions tabled by Members.

The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 2 October 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mrs Barton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of the pensions for those injured in the Troubles.
(AQW 6049/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Department of Justice was designated to exercise the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the Board's behalf under para 2(1) of Schedule 1 to the Victims' Payments Regulation 2020 on 24 August 2020.

Dr Aiken asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether they support the rule of law; and (ii) when will they establish the mechanisms for the delivery of the victims pension.
(AQW 6098/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Department of Justice was designated to exercise the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the Board's behalf under para 2(1) of Schedule 1 to the Victims' Payments Regulation 2020 on 24 August 2020.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action, in light of the Pledge of Office, will be taken on foot of the finding by Justice McAlinden that the deputy First Minister's thwarting of movement on the victims' pension is a patent example of an attempt to subvert the rule of law for political ends.
(AQW 6100/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Department of Justice was designated to exercise the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the Board's behalf under para 2(1) of Schedule 1 to the Victims' Payments Regulations 2020 on 24th August 2020.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of the apparent spread in ragwort this year; and (ii) how his Department will address this.
(AQW 6577/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Department does not carry out any specific surveys of the distribution of weeds listed under The Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, which includes ragwort. The Department however investigates all complaints involving noxious weeds, including ragwort, under the Order and issues Notices to landowners to control weeds where agricultural land is threatened from spread. Follow up inspections over recent years have confirmed satisfactory implementation by landowners of Notice control requirements. I am advised that no substantive increase in noxious weed complaints are under investigation by the Department, to date this year.

The Department will also continue to raise awareness of landowners, and encourage control of noxious weeds through annual mail shots, poster distribution and press articles, including advice on methods of control.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when he will outline his Department's proposals for a post-Brexit agriculture framework.
(AQW 6826/17-22)

Mr Poots: Following EU Exit I am committed to ensuring that we have an agricultural policy that meets the future needs of the local industry, that makes farms as sustainable as possible, and that supports and enhances our cultural landscape.

In developing a future support framework, priority consideration will be 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.

My focus during this transition period is to ensure that existing schemes and arrangements can continue in Northern Ireland post EU exit and that farmers do not face unacceptable uncertainty.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment has been made in relation to the continuation of derogations from existing EU legislation within Annex 2 of the Protocol that the agri-food sector here benefits from.

(AQW 6842/17-22)

Mr Poots: At the end of the Transition Period, the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol will come into effect where Northern Ireland will remain aligned to the EU legislation listed in Annex 2 to the Protocol, including any derogations that exist under that legislation. I am not aware of any reason why our agri-food sector will not continue to avail of these derogations.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether he is aware of postcode areas where farmers and farm businesses struggle to get insurance for machinery and livestock; and (ii) if so, whether he will engage with the insurance industry on behalf of farmers.

(AQW 6921/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department holds no information on the cost or availability of commercial insurance by postcode across Northern Ireland.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the impact on both river water quality and biodiversity, and with the Executive not hitting its biodiversity targets, (i) whether his Department or statutory bodies carry out periodical cleaning and removal of waste from rivers; and (ii) if not, whether he will make provisions to carry out this work.

(AQW 6988/17-22)

Mr Poots: While DAERA does not have a statutory duty to remove waste from rivers, my Department adopts a proactive approach both in terms of preventing waste from entering our waterways and supporting voluntary clean-up efforts. For example, education is a vital and essential component in the fight against litter and to that end, we work closely with Councils and environmental NGOs to develop and support educational & promotional campaigns aimed at achieving behavioural change. In particular, my Department's Environment Fund (financed through the carrier bag levy) directly supports 'Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful' (KNIB) which runs a number of programmes, including: 'Eco-Schools'; 'Live Here, Love Here'; 'Clean Coast'; and 'Adopt-A-Spot' projects. Over £3 million of support has been awarded to KNIB since 2007/08 with additional current funding of over £1 million to further support KNIB's educational & promotional campaigns.

My Department also introduced the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (NI) 2011, which allows councils to issue fines of up to £80 for litter offences or £2,500 for cases dealt with through the courts. Local Councils are responsible for dealing with litter issues at an operational level, however, my Department continues to keep this legislation under review, and is currently undertaking a review of the fixed penalty notices available to Councils to penalise offenders.

In addition to this robust legislation, the Department introduced the carrier bag levy in 2013. This initiative has directly reduced the number of carrier bags dispensed in Northern Ireland by over 1 billion since its introduction, and thereby reduced the number of discarded bags entering our waterways. The levy has generated tens of millions of pounds for local environmental projects – including anti-litter projects.

DAERA also supports KNIB's 'Big Spring Clean' – Northern Ireland's largest community clean-up campaign – which involves over 100,000 volunteers in local clean-up activities every year. The Department also produced Northern Ireland's first Marine Litter Strategy in 2013. The Strategy is delivered through a coalition of partners, including KNIB, and its 'Live Here, Love Here' campaign is one of the schemes helping tackle this pollution.

My Department's Marine Division publishes the 'Marine Litter Watch' e-zine (www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/marine-litter), which contains articles and updates on actions to reduce litter pollution and to improve environmental quality such as work undertaken by the Ballinderry Rivers Trust.

DAERA Inland Fisheries' small grant 'Angling Event Fund' provides grants of up to £500 specifically for events that encourage new participants into angling. In the past some of these events have been combined with 'Leave No Trace' and similar schemes and the Department would be supportive of those initiatives where they can be combined with an angling event. DAERA's Inland Fisheries Outreach Team may also be able to provide other types of support and involvement in river clean up schemes and is keen to work with groups.

This summer I joined volunteers on a river clean-up exercise on the upper Bann between Portadown Golf Club and Bannfoot at the mouth of Lough Neagh. This gave me an excellent opportunity to see first-hand the extremely valuable work undertaken by volunteers and the experience has increased my determination to tackle the littering which blights our waterways. As we begin our recovery from the COVID pandemic, my Department is presently working with TourismNI to promote the message

"Be Outdoor Smart – Leave No Trace – Love The Place" which reinforces our objective of encouraging everyone to look after our environment.

The Department for Infrastructure is the statutory drainage authority and as such their role is to undertake maintenance of designated watercourses, on a cyclical basis, to reduce flood risk.

We all have our part to play and I am committed to promoting and funding environmental education and action, and building civic pride to ensure that sustainability is at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone in Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6992/17-22)

Mr Poots: In December 2016, the previous DAERA Minister, Michele McIlveen, gave a commitment to develop an air quality strategy for Northern Ireland.

Since then, the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has been working on developing a draft Clean Air Strategy discussion document. Work has involved close collaboration with other Departments, in particular the Department for Infrastructure.

I am currently considering the draft Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document. Following this, I will review the options for issuing the draft Clean Air Strategy discussion document for public consultation later in the year to seek views on a wide range of matters.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether an updated Northern Ireland Species Action Plan will be published in conjunction with the revised Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy.

(AQW 7057/17-22)

Mr Poots: Individual Species Action Plans were produced in the past by the then Environment and Heritage Service, and there are no current plans to update these although they remain useful sources of information. More focussed action is being developed for some species such as Red squirrel and curlew, and other farmland wading birds.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department is taking to move towards the elimination of the use of plastic carrier bags.

(AQW 7058/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has and continues to adopt a systematic approach to tackling the causes of plastic waste and one of our major interventions has been through the Carrier Bag Levy. Having one of the most extensive levies in the UK, we have already removed in excess of 1.5 billion bags from circulation since introduction in 2013.

Our recently published bag usage annual statistics for 2019/20 outlined that there was a reduction of 13.9% bags from the previous year across NI marking the seventh year of downward usage trends. While these trends are most welcome I have asked officials to carry out work to analyse whether any changes to the existing levy are now necessary.

I am aware how the high levels of plastic waste in our environment is a global and often complex issue and I support the Executive's way forward, as outlined in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document which included the commitment to create a plan to eliminate plastic pollution across NI. My Department will shortly issue a single use plastic reduction action plan providing guidance and instruction on the removal of Single Use Plastics across the NI Executive estate.

I have most recently enrolled my Department in the trailblazing UK wide Plastics Pact which seeks to meet four key targets by 2025 to address the problems of plastic waste and also we continue to collaborate with the other devolved administrations in the reform of the UK-wide packaging system to deliver greater collection and recycling of plastic waste.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether any decision has been made by his Department to extend a turf cutting operation at Portglenone; and (ii) if so, whether that decision was subject to climate or other environmental assessments.

(AQW 7062/17-22)

Mr Poots: The extraction of peat at the Newferry site near Portglenone has been ongoing under commercial lease arrangements between the Department and Bulrush Horticulture Ltd (BHL), since 1979. The future arrangements for the site are currently under review by the Department. This includes the Department's consideration of an outline proposal from BHL, which places a strong emphasis on site restoration works, as an integral part of a further tenancy period.

The Department will take account of the carbon sequestration potential and wider environmental policy objectives, in reaching its decision on the future management of the Newferry site.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what is the estimated time required to complete the infrastructure preparations at existing entry points for agri-food goods as required by the Withdrawal Agreement.

(AQW 7115/17-22)

Mr Poots: In common with the UK Government, I want the Northern Ireland Protocol implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of agri-food trade and works for our businesses and citizens. As a consequence of the protocol this means having Point of Entry facilities designated by the European Union at Belfast, Larne, Warrenpoint and Foyle Ports and also the Northern Ireland airports (along with the necessary processes, IT capabilities and personnel). This will enable the continued importation of animal and plant products, plants and live animals.

As of 15 September, DAERA officials working at pace have progressed the next steps for programme delivery and initiated the tender process in line with the programme procurement strategy and submitted proposed Certificate of Lawful Use or Development (CLUD) applications to the relevant Council authorities.

I have been made aware that the programme delivery is assessed as RED, and as such the programme team will not be able to deliver in full by 31 December 2020.

My Officials are now engaged in contingency planning to identify what can be achieved by 31 December 2020, alongside the fuller implementation of all requirements. Until they have completed that work I am unable to advise you of the time required to complete the infrastructure preparations.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what legal advice he has sought should he fail to make the preparations required by the Withdrawal Agreement, as requested by the Secretary of State.
(AQW 7116/17-22)

Mr Poots: Legal advice has been sought during various stages of the programme from the Departmental Solicitors Office and from the Attorney General. DSO has advised that the obligation to implement the NI Protocol is on the UK Government, and it has given the Protocol domestic legal effect by section 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. It has ongoing obligations under the Withdrawal Agreement to create the legal effects set out in it. The Official Controls Regulation (OCR) requirements are part of domestic law as a result of Article 5(4) of the NI Protocol and s. 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Under the OCR, DAERA is responsible for Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks on certain goods coming into Northern Ireland. DAERA is therefore required by UK domestic law to ensure compliance with its legal duties under the OCR.

The consequences of a failure by the Department to implement its responsibilities may be a judicial review or a claim for damages by affected parties. Furthermore, failure to implement the NI Protocol may result in penalties under the Withdrawal Agreement, to which the UK Government may require the Department to contribute.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 5468/17-22, (i) whether a business case has yet been submitted in respect of the proposals being taken forward at Northern Ireland ports; and (ii) what is the level of expected expenditure.
(AQW 7123/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Official Controls Regulation (OCR) requirements are part of domestic law as a result of Article 5(4) of the Northern Ireland Protocol and s. 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) must comply with this legal requirement. The OCR is included in Annex 2 of the Northern Ireland Protocol to the Withdrawal Agreement, which was entered into by the UK and the EU. Under the OCR, the Department is responsible for Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks on certain goods coming into Northern Ireland.

The UK Government's Command Paper – "The UK's Approach to the Northern Ireland Protocol" – stated the need to expand some existing entry points for agrifood goods to provide for proportionate additional controls.

In common with the UK Government, I am clear that the Northern Ireland Protocol needs to be implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of agri-food trade and does not increase costs for our businesses and people living in Northern Ireland. Officials are therefore working to minimise the need for infrastructure.

A business case for the work necessary to carry out the required SPS checks at Northern Ireland Points of Entry has been forwarded by officials to the Department of Finance and Her Majesty's Treasury. This includes building work, additional staff and IT functions. Funding has been secured for some £43 million, of which some £37 million for capital expenditure. A further £6 million revenue will also be required for recruiting, training, employing additional personnel and programme implementation costs.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what is anticipated in terms of infrastructure at Northern Ireland ports arising from the Withdrawal Agreement Protocol.
(AQW 7124/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Official Controls Regulation (OCR) requirements are part of domestic law as a result of Article 5(4) of the Northern Ireland Protocol and s. 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) must comply with this legal requirement. The OCR is included in Annex 2 of the Northern Ireland Protocol to the Withdrawal Agreement, which was entered into by the UK and the EU.

Under the OCR, the Department is responsible for Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks on certain goods coming into Northern Ireland. As a consequence of these requirements, Point of Entry facilities, designated by the European Union, will be required at Belfast, Larne, Warrenpoint and Foyle Ports and also the Northern Ireland airports (along with the necessary

processes, IT capabilities and personnel). This will enable the continued importation of animal and plant products, plants and live animals.

This is consistent with the UK Government's Command Paper – "The UK's Approach to the Northern Ireland Protocol" – which stated the need to expand some existing entry points for agrifood goods to provide for proportionate additional controls.

In common with the UK Government, I am clear that the Northern Ireland Protocol needs to be implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of agri-food trade and does not increase costs for our businesses and people living in Northern Ireland. Officials are therefore working to minimise the need for infrastructure.

A business case for the work necessary to carry out the required SPS checks at Northern Ireland Points of Entry has been forwarded by officials to the Department of Finance and Her Majesty's Treasury. This includes building work, additional staff and IT functions. Funding has been secured for some £43 million, of which some £37 million for capital expenditure. A further £6 million revenue will also be required for recruiting, training, employing additional personnel and programme implementation costs.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in light of his assurance that he had no intention of facilitating infrastructure at Northern Ireland ports, (i) for his assessment of the infrastructure being provided at Northern Ireland ports arising from the Withdrawal Agreement Protocol; and (ii) why he is providing it.

(AQW 7125/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Official Controls Regulation (OCR) requirements are part of domestic law as a result of Article 5(4) of the Northern Ireland Protocol and s. 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) must comply with this legal requirement. The OCR is included in Annex 2 of the Northern Ireland Protocol to the Withdrawal Agreement, which was entered into by the UK and the EU.

Under the OCR, the Department is responsible for Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks on certain goods coming into Northern Ireland. As a consequence of these requirements, Point of Entry facilities, designated by the European Union, will be required at Belfast, Larne, Warrenpoint and Foyle Ports and also the Northern Ireland airports (along with the necessary processes, IT capabilities and personnel). This will enable the continued importation of animal and plant products, plants and live animals.

This is consistent with the UK Government's Command Paper – "The UK's Approach to the Northern Ireland Protocol" – which stated the need to expand some existing entry points for agrifood goods to provide for proportionate additional controls.

In common with the UK Government, I am clear that the Northern Ireland Protocol needs to be implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of agri-food trade and does not increase costs for our businesses and people living in Northern Ireland. Officials are therefore working to minimise the need for infrastructure.

A business case for the work necessary to carry out the required SPS checks at Northern Ireland Points of Entry has been forwarded by officials to the Department of Finance and Her Majesty's Treasury. This includes building work, additional staff and IT functions. Funding has been secured for some £43 million, of which some £37 million for capital expenditure. A further £6 million revenue will also be required for recruiting, training, employing additional personnel and programme implementation costs.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to lay in the Assembly Library a copy of any correspondence from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs providing instructions and/or directions as to the establishment of infrastructure at our ports pursuant to the Withdrawal Agreement Protocol.

(AQW 7126/17-22)

Mr Poots: Whilst I am aware that a copy of the letter you refer to has been shared with the press in recent days, I am unable share this letter as it was written by the Secretary of State to my officials and they have as yet been unable to obtain his permission to release a copy.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 4258/17-22, (i) whether he has considered the need for additional legislative measures to address biodiversity loss; and (ii) whether he plans to bring forward legislation in this area.

(AQW 7139/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has recently initiated work on a number of new important initiatives such as 'Green Growth' framework alongside a public discussion document on an Environment Strategy. These measures, along with a proposed new strategy on Peatlands and a possible review of the Biodiversity Strategy in 2021/22 will refocus attention on national actions and international objectives which are primarily aimed to assist halt the loss of biodiversity. I believe that these measures alongside existing legislation and policy commitments, provide a sound basis for the continued protection and enhancement of the environment, particularly in relation to biodiversity.

I am committed to taking all appropriate steps, including new legislation if necessary, to achieve our environmental objectives and obligations. By implementing the measures detailed above, I am confident that industry, environmental groups and other government departments will embrace actions necessary to increase Northern Ireland's biodiversity.

It is clear that working together on common aims will result in the best chance of addressing biodiversity loss for society's future gain. While I have no plans to introduce additional legislation at this time, I am content to keep under review the need for new legislation on biodiversity loss if required.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what sanctions will be imposed should targets set out in the 2015-2020 Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy are not met.
(AQW 7142/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy 2015–2020 contains a number of high level targets from different initiatives across local and central Government, eNGOs, etc. There are no sanctions applicable against any of the targets that are not completed in the strategy.

As part of my Department's ongoing commitments on biodiversity, officials will be reviewing the strategy's implementation plan at the beginning of 2021. Many of the targets are not due for completion until the end of 2020.

This review will coincide with the development of any new Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy, which could result following new international targets to be agreed at the meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity. It is anticipated that this meeting will take place in May 2021.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) funding opportunities; and (ii) grants available to farmers through his Department.
(AQW 7169/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) Funding opportunities are available to farmers through the following schemes:
 - Basic Payment Scheme
 - Young Farmers' Payment
 - The Agricultural Commodities (Coronavirus) (Income Support) Scheme
- (ii) Grants are available to farmers through the following schemes:
 - Environmental Farming Scheme
 - Woodland Investment Grant
 - Forest Expansion Scheme
 - Forest Protection Scheme

I am considering a further tranche of Tier 1 of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme - Capital, and the appropriate timing for it, taking account of the issues and challenges presented for the farming sector by the COVID-19 situation.

Information on the individual schemes, including opening and closing dates, is published on the Department's website.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what progress reports (i) he has requested of his Department's racial equality champion since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020; and (ii) his Department's racial equality champion has provided since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020.
(AQW 7214/17-22)

Mr Poots: Work on the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 has not progressed across the NICS as envisaged due to a number of reasons, including Assembly suspension, EU Exit and Covid-19.

Under the New Decade, New Approach agreement we look forward to the development of a new and updated Racial Equality Strategy. This updated approach to the Strategy will form the basis for reporting in going forward with this important work.

Nevertheless, the DAERA Racial Equality Champion provided relevant input to the Issues Register, although a meeting planned for March to agree the Action Plan did not proceed.

Furthermore, I am aware of the key work that the DAERA Racial Equality Champion is leading. A new dedicated resource has been secured for diversity issues; some of the main objectives met by the diversity officer and the Racial Equality Champion is the annual Calendar of Events and a draft Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan which is in the final stages of approval and implementation.

DAERA is fully committed to progressing work on diversity and racial equality issues.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to review the legislation covering animal cruelty, in particular a review of penalties for animal cruelty offences.
(AQW 7229/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has no plans to review the legislation governing animal welfare or the penalties available for animal welfare offences in Northern Ireland. The maximum penalties available to the courts here were increased in 2011 and again

in 2016. They are amongst the most stringent in the United Kingdom. Other jurisdictions of the United Kingdom are currently increasing the penalties available there to bring them into line with those in Northern Ireland.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether his Department is aware of a slurry spill into waters at Crawfordsburn Country Park; and (ii) to detail the work of his Department in monitoring water quality at the site.

(AQW 7239/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) I can confirm that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) are aware of a recent water pollution incident that impacted the Crawfordsburn River through Crawfordsburn, Co Down. A report was received via the Incident Hotline on the morning of Sunday 13 September 2020, from a member of the public indicating that the Crawfordsburn River was visibly polluted. Following the report, NIEA deployed a Water Quality Inspector to the area to confirm the report and assess the environmental impact.
- (ii) Regarding monitoring of water quality, this is done in respect of both the Crawfordsburn River and the Bathing Waters in the area i.e. Crawfordsburn and Helen's Bay.

NIEA monitor all rivers in NI under the requirements of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) to assess overall water quality status. The WFD operational monitoring station Crawfordsburn River at Crawfordsburn Country Park is monitored for a number of parameters as required by the Water Framework Directive. In the most recent assessment in 2018 Crawfordsburn River was classified as Moderate Overall status due to Soluble Reactive Phosphorus. All other monitored elements were assessed as High or Good status.

DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division monitors bathing water quality at 26 identified bathing waters, including Crawfordsburn, during the designated bathing season from June until mid-September each year. The programme follows the EC Bathing Water Directive 2006/7/EC standards and protocols. During 2020, a reduced programme was completed due to COVID 19 restrictions in the field and laboratory. All results from Crawfordsburn and Helen's Bay for the 2020 bathing season have returned results indicating "Excellent" water quality under the EC Bathing Water Directive.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in light of the increased level of open water swimming, whether he will include waters at (i) Brompton Road, Bangor; and (ii) Skippingstone Beach, Bangor as designated bathing sites for water quality testing.

(AQW 7321/17-22)

Mr Poots: Interested parties who wish to nominate a site for consideration as a formally identified bathing water may do so at any time, subject to the nomination meeting certain criteria. These criteria include:

- provision of initial usage evidence at the site (the selection criteria for candidate sites is over 45 bathers on at least one occasion or over 100 beach users on at least two occasions across a review period)
- evidence that bathing is not prohibited or inadvisable for reasons of safety
- provision of information about site facilities for example, signage, litter collection, site access, car parks, lifeguards, changing facilities
- confirmation from an appropriate body (such as a Council) that it is willing to accept the responsibilities as the bathing water operator
- Once the Department is satisfied that the criteria have been met, it shall seek to verify the initial usage data by conducting its own survey at the candidate site during the course of the next bathing season. Should this be verified, and the other criteria continue to be met, the Department would then undertake a public consultation with a recommendation that the candidate site be formally identified as a bathing water.

Any representations, comments or queries in respect of the nomination and identification process should be directed to Marine.InfoRequests@daera-ni.gov.uk.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in light of the increased level of open water swimming, whether he will consider extending the period when bathing water quality testing occurs beyond currently pre-defined timescale of 1 June to 15 September.

(AQW 7325/17-22)

Mr Poots: The current bathing season of 1st June to 15th September is determined by the Quality of Bathing Water Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008. These regulations give effect to the EU Bathing Water Directive (2006/7/EC) which seeks to preserve, protect and improve the quality of the environment and to protect human health in relation to waters that have been identified where bathing is traditionally practiced by large numbers of bathers.

However, the arrangements for Northern Ireland Bathing Waters are subject to regular review. A comprehensive review is due to be undertaken post EU exit, when the Department will consult with the public and statutory bodies as to the suitability of current arrangements, and undertake amendment where the evidence suggests it would be beneficial to the public.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how he will address the danger posed to the crew of a fishing boat, and the wider community, by munitions brought ashore at Ardglass harbour on 19 September 2020.
(AQW 7333/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have asked my officials to contact all Northern Ireland registered fishing vessels and to circulate a copy of the Marine Guidance Note MGN 323 (M+F) of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA). This gives guidance and recommendations about best practice to the fishing industry on interpretation of law and general safety advice.

In the rare event that a fishing vessel recovers a piece of unexploded ordnance in its nets, they must immediately inform the MCA by VHF Radio. The Coastguard, follow the pre-determined protocol in MGN 323(M+F), and will talk to the skipper of the vessel to assess the risk posed. This often results in the skipper being directed to a safe area and instructed to lower the object to the seabed and mark it with a buoy. Royal Navy Explosive Ordnance Unit will then destroy the object in situ.

The coastguard will never direct a fishing vessel to bring unexploded ordnance back to a harbour.

In the case of Ardglass last week, where ordnance was landed at the harbour, the matter was dealt with by the PSNI. I commend the Ardglass Harbour Master for spotting and reporting the suspicious devices.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the discussions he is having with (i) the European Commission; and (ii) the British Government on the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.
(AQW 7366/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am having no direct discussions with the European Commission.

The Inter Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs continues to meet by video conference. I attend this group which facilitates regular discussions with other UK Ministers on preparations for the end of the transition period and operation of the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the impact the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill will have on the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.
(AQO 730/17-22)

Mr Poots: The United Kingdom Internal Market Bill has not made its way through all stages of Parliament and we will have to await the version that passes into law before the precise impact on the NI Protocol can be assessed.

Furthermore the relevant Clauses in the Bill do not actually change the NI Protocol, rather they give discretionary power to the BEIS Secretary of State to bring forward regulations to make changes. Whether any such regulations will be brought forward, precisely what they would change and whether they would be approved by Parliament remains to be seen.

With all of these uncertainties it would be premature to outline how the NI Protocol will be impacted by the UK Internal Market Bill.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of noxious gas concerns in the Colin area, West Belfast.
(AQW 7787/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware there has been an increase in odour complaints from the Colin Area in recent months. As the Colin Area covers quite a large geographical area, it is likely that a number of different sources may be causing an odour nuisance depending on wind direction. Some of these potential odour sources are regulated by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) including: Natural World Products (NWP) composting facility, the Mullaghglass landfill and Montupet (UK) Ltd. There may be other odour sources in the area that are not regulated by NIEA.

I am aware that the NWP composting facility on the Glenside Road accepted a new waste stream in late July 2020 which caused an odour in parts of the Colin area. Once this became apparent, the operator stopped accepting this material for processing. There was however still a residual odour for a few weeks in August as the material passed through the system. More recent follow up checks by NIEA in September indicate that this issue is now resolved.

There is an ongoing odour issue caused by the Mullaghglass landfill which is affecting the Mount Eagles area close to the site. Recent site inspections by NIEA officers have confirmed that there is a distinct landfill gas odour downwind of the Mullaghglass Landfill and if the wind is from a westerly direction, there is the potential for significant odour nuisance in the Mount Eagles area. I understand that landfill gas generation from recent waste deposits has commenced sooner than expected. In response, the planned installation of additional gas extraction wells has been brought forward by the landfill operator from November 2020 to September 2020. I am aware that the operator has specialist contractors on site this week to start the installation of the additional gas wells to address this issue. It may take a number of weeks to complete these site works and commence gas extraction before the issue can be resolved. In the meantime odour suppression equipment is in operation at the Mullaghglass site, and this was observed by NIEA inspectors on Friday 25 September. NIEA will continue to closely monitor the situation in the area and will track progress to ensure the operator completes the site works as soon as possible.

NIEA also regulates the Montupet (Linamar) facility based in the Dunmurry business park and they have received complaints recently regarding odour from that installation. While emissions monitoring at the site has shown that the installation is currently in compliance with permitted emission limit values, there are occasions when an odour can be detected dependant on the wind direction. NIEA have been engaging with the site operator, who continually monitor the performance of their abatement plants to ensure emissions to air are minimised, however due to a number of other odour sources, they do not believe that they are responsible for all odour complaints in the areas surrounding their installation. NIEA will continue to investigate these odour complaints and liaise with the operator to address odour issues where they are believed to originate from their installation.

Department for Communities

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she will consult with members of the deaf community and their various representative groups before implementing any Video Relay Service scheme.

(AQW 6218/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): Co-design is at the heart of the approach set out in the New Decade New Approach Agreement. Work on both Sign Language legislation and the Department's Disability Strategy, as referenced in New Decade, New Approach, is being taken forward using co-design methodology and will involve representatives from the Deaf community.

My officials and I met with the Coalition on Deafness on 9 September and I am pleased to note that we had a constructive discussion on how we continue to support deaf people. I have instructed my officials to continue this engagement with the Deaf community and its various representative groups over the coming weeks and months.

I remain committed to ensuring that BSL and ISL users have the same rights and opportunities as those of us in the hearing community.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Communities to detail the rate of uptake of Pension Credit among over 75 year olds living in Northern Ireland; and to provide a breakdown by council area.

(AQW 6862/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department will shortly publish new experimental statistics on Pension Credit uptake which will include data by Local Government District.

I encourage anyone over State Pension Age to take a few minutes to make sure they are getting all they are entitled to. They can do this by calling the Pension Centre line on 0800 587 0892 or by visiting www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/state-pension/pension-credit. There's also an online calculator to check eligibility and get an estimate of what they may be entitled to.

Since 2015 the Make the Call Service has delivered just over £22m in additional Pension Credit payable to Pensioners and whilst that work continues my Department will in the coming weeks also undertake a number of actions intended to further increase awareness of Pension Credit.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Communities whether gambling operators are permitted, under the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, to advertise their services by way of sound broadcasting or television to the public in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6952/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Article 32 (Bookmakers); Article 111 (Amusements); and Article 130 (Gaming) of The Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (NI) Order 1985 sets out the law in respect of advertising of gambling products and services.

Under Section 5 of the Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Act 2014 it is an offence for any remote (online) operator to advertise to consumers here unless they hold the appropriate Gambling Commission licence.

The advertising of gambling products and services here must comply with the Advertising Codes issued by the Committees of Advertising Practice and administered by the Advertising Standards Authority.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the budget allocated for her bespoke kickstart scheme.

(AQW 6959/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Officials in my Department are working closely with the Department for the Economy and the Department of Finance.

My Department will provide a scheme that best suits the needs of employers and young people.

I will publish the exact amount of funding to cover the implementation of this scheme in due course.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the support provided to the arts sector in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6960/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Minister Hargey and I have provided an additional £5.5m for a Creative Support Fund, to be delivered through the Arts Council NI, for individuals and organisations across the arts sector. To date £1.9 million has been paid to small and medium organisations and just over £0.5 million to individuals. It is expected that the remaining £3.1 million will be confirmed by the end of October.

In addition, I have submitted a bid to Department of Finance to secure financial support here to support culture, language, arts and heritage organisations, local musicians, freelancers and artists at a time when they are struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many people are on the social housing waiting list for North Down; and (ii) for a breakdown of (a) the number deemed in housing stress; and (b) the number of registered homeless over the last five years.

(AQW 6980/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the table below. This details the number of Applicants on the waiting list, those in Housing Stress and those awarded Full Duty Applicant (FDA) status as at the end of June in each year for last five years, within the North Down Parliamentary Constituency.

Year	Applicants (Total)	Applicants in Housing Stress	FDA Applicants
June 2020	1,707	1,229	880
June 2019	1,700	1,215	839
June 2018	1,720	1,195	800
June 2017	1,943	1,258	792
June 2016	2,045	1,306	810
June 2015	2,071	1,238	721

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many people in each constituency are homeless.

(AQW 7022/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The table below details All Applicants and Homeless (Full Duty Applicants) as of the end of June 2020.

Constituency	All Applicants	Homeless FDA
Belfast East	1926	955
Belfast East/South*	381	194
Belfast North	4155	2547
Belfast South	2567	1566
Belfast South/Strangford*	104	74
Belfast West	3540	2407
Belfast West/North*	108	57
Belfast West/South*	25	19
East Antrim	1617	878
East L/Derry	2167	881
Fermanagh South Tyrone	1803	777
Foyle	4071	2732
Lagan Valley	1891	1101
Mid Ulster	1145	441
Newry & Armagh	2106	1120
North Antrim	2139	1065

Constituency	All Applicants	Homeless FDA
North Down	1707	880
South Antrim	1511	947
South Down	1796	1075
Strangford	1465	723
Upper Bann	2518	915
West Tyrone	1574	601
Total	40316	21955

* The following Common Landlord Areas (CLA) cross Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries: Common Landlord areas which cross Parliamentary Constituency boundaries have been split and counted separately.

Housing Executive CLA Parliamentary Constituency

- Cregagh Castlereagh Belfast East/South
- Willowfield/Upper Castlereagh Road Belfast East/South
- Carryduff Belfast South/Strangford
- Ainsworth Belfast West/North
- Twaddell/Upper Woodvale Belfast West/North
- Hamill St / John St Belfast West/South
- Carrick Hill / Unity Flats Belfast West/North
- Bridge End / Rotherdam Court Belfast East/South

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) households; and (ii) children in those households affected by the two-child maximum rule for the child element of Universal Credit for (a) 2017-18; (b) 2018-19; and (c) the most up to date figures.

(AQW 7023/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As at 31 May 2020, a total of 2,620 Universal Credit (UC) households were impacted by the two child policy. Historical data and data on the number of children in impacted households are not currently available. My Department continues to develop the range of statistical data on Universal Credit and as additional information becomes available it will be published on my Department's website.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities to detail the funding her Department has provided to the GAA in each of the last three years; and to outline the projects on which the funding was spent.

(AQW 7035/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The table below provides a summary of funding provided to Ulster GAA in each of the last three years. The figures also include funding provided by Sport NI, an arms-length body of the Department.

Year	Level of Funding
2017/18	£1,622,229
2018/19	£750,878
2019/20	£707,052

Due to the volume of detail required to answer the question in full, I have arranged for these details to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for Communities when the £33 million received as a consequence of the UK Government's aid package for the arts will be allocated to the local arts sector.

(AQW 7061/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Minister Hargey and I have provided an additional £5.5m for a Creative Support Fund, to be delivered through the Arts Council NI, for individuals and organisations across the arts sector. To date £1.9 million has been paid to small and medium organisations and just over £0.5 million to individuals. It is expected that the remaining £3.1 million will be confirmed by the end of October.

In addition, I have submitted a bid to Department of Finance to secure financial support here to support culture, language, arts and heritage organisations, local musicians, freelancers and artists at a time when they are struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to increase the awareness of the Universal Credit Contingency Fund.

(AQW 7093/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Claims for the Universal Credit Contingency Fund can be made via nidirect using an online application form or by calling the Freephone number on 0800 587 2750.

Information on how to apply is advertised to everyone making a new claim to Universal Credit via their customer journal. From 21 September 2020, a link to the online application form has now been included in the journal entry.

Further information on all Finance Support provisions, including the Universal Credit Contingency Fund, is available on the Extra Finance Support page on nidirect.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has considered making a further £20 per week increase to the child element of Universal Credit.

(AQW 7095/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Any amendments would require changes to the existing legislation and Assembly support. The costs would also have to be funded locally and agreed by the Assembly.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I have taken a number of steps to ensure that the social security system is more flexible, to relieve hardship and to ensure people most in need get the help and support they require. These include:

- increasing the standard allowance of Universal Credit (and working tax credit) for this financial year by £1,040 per year (£20 a week). This is in addition to the annual uprating of 1.7%. This means that for a single Universal Credit claimant aged 25 or over, the standard allowance will increase from £317.82 to £409.89 per month;
- increasing the Local Housing Allowance rates for Universal Credit and Housing Benefit claimants so that it covers the cheapest 30% of local market rents;
- making a number of enhancements to the Discretionary Support scheme including increasing the amount of individual living expenses awards by increasing the rate of benefit used when calculating awards and allowing discretion to pay for longer periods;
- increasing the Discretionary Support Annual Income Threshold to £20,405 and increasing the debt threshold to £1,500 to ensure that more people on a low income can access assistance when they need it most;
- providing access to emergency financial support through the Discretionary Support scheme to students in full-time education who are normally not eligible for benefits; and
- providing a grant (rather than a loan) for short-term living expenses where a claimant or a member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with guidance published by the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being. There is no restriction on the number of COVID-19 related grants that a claimant can receive.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Communities, given COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, what consideration can be given to permitting the Industrial Injuries Board make decisions based on existing medical reports, rather than face to face assessment interviews, for those with a combination of physical and mental health issues.

(AQW 7107/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: At present there are no face-to-face assessment interviews being conducted for the purposes of claiming Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit.

In the event that someone's health is significantly impacted by both physical and mental health issues, they can be assessed based on the evidence available and/or requested

Once evidence has been received, it is scrutinised by a Departmental Decision Maker and then referred to a Medical Assessor for their opinion, this primarily concerns mental health claims. Confirmation is sought from the applicant that they are content for the Medical Adviser to provide an opinion based on the medical reports/written evidence submitted by them.

However, this may not always be appropriate. For example, if an individual requires a physical assessment to examine the specific injured areas, this cannot be completed via telephone contact or paper assessment. Therefore, arrangements will be made for a face to face assessment when available.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the funding her Department gives to amateur sporting clubs for capital projects.

(AQW 7112/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department provided capital funding to amateur sports clubs, directly and through SportNI, for a range of projects under a number of different programmes.

Amateur sports clubs were eligible to apply for the Departments Small Capital Grants Programme, which provided grants of up to £5000. Clubs have also been able to secure funding of up to £30,000 for pitch maintenance equipment to ensure the playing facilities are maintained to a high standard.

In this current financial year, the Department has allocated Sport NI a capital budget of £400,000 to fund immediate health and safety requirements at sports grounds, with a particular focus on designated venues within the Safety at Sports Grounds (NI) Order 2006.

Sport NI has also been allocated £650,000 for the Your School Your Club initiative which invests in projects which enhance existing school sports facilities for use by local communities and sporting clubs outside of school hours.

In addition, over the five year period up to 2020, Sport NI has invested National Lottery funding into sports facility capital projects through its Single Facility Fund which delivered a total of 31 sports projects and Everybody Active Outdoor Spaces Programme.

Sport NI is currently developing proposals aligned to its draft Corporate Plan (2020-2025) to bring forward additional funding opportunities for the sports sector.

Other sports clubs have had projects funded or supported through the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund.

Full details of Exchequer and National Lottery funding provided to amateur sports clubs can be found at the Government Funding Database – <https://govfundingpublic.nics.gov.uk/GrantsAwarded.aspx> and Sport NI Website – www.sportni.net/sportni/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/All-Sport-Northern-Ireland-National-Lottery-Funded-Investments.pdf

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities what progress reports (i) she has requested of his Department's racial equality champion since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020; and (ii) her Department's racial equality champion has provided since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020.

(AQW 7119/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I previously set out how my Departmental Racial Equality Champion, as part of the NICS Racial Equality Champions Group, was due to meet with the Racial Equality subgroup in March 2020 to discuss the co-design of a draft work plan (AQW 5291/17-22 refers). This meeting was postponed amidst the unprecedented pressures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Work on the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 has not progressed across the NICS as first envisaged due to a number of reasons, including Assembly suspension, EU Exit and Covid-19. However, it is my expectation that, in addition to ensuring synergy across all Departments to achieve the goals of the Strategy, the work plan will set out how we report our progress towards achieving the objectives and goals of the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025.

In the absence of an agreed work plan, no reports have been requested nor provided since January 2020. However, my Departmental Racial Equality Champion continues to ensure that messages about the importance of racial

equality and good race relations are consistent and visible to all staff including Non-Departmental Public Bodies and other service providers.

As a 'Friend of Mela', my Department has worked with Belfast Mela festival organisers to participate in this year's annual event and my 'Make the Call' team advertised their services.

I remain committed to ensuring that due regard is given to racial equality when designing or delivering public services and in line with current equality legislation and best practice guidelines.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of properties transferred to her department from the Ministry of Defence, over the last five years.

(AQW 7127/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Ministry of Defence gifted 59 former military properties at Mountview and Skyline in Lisburn to the Department for Communities in January 2017.

The properties were subsequently transferred to Clanmil Housing Association on 25th March 2019. Clanmil Housing has since redeveloped the properties for both social housing (30 properties) and intermediate housing (29 properties).

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether she submitted a bid to the Department of Finance for the entire £33 million in Barnett consequentials received as part of the UK support package for the arts sector.

(AQW 7128/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The bid submitted to the Department of Finance to secure financial support here to support culture, language, arts and heritage organisations, local musicians, freelancers and artists was for £33m.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities (i) to detail the bids made to the Minister for Finance for funding to provide support to the arts sector; (ii) when the bids were made; and (iii) how much funding was received from the bids.

(AQW 7131/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is for the Executive to decide where funding arising as a consequence of the Barnett formula is allocated. My department submitted a bid for £33m in earlier in September to secure financial support here to support culture, language,

arts and heritage organisations, local musicians, freelancers and artists at a time when they are struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Creative Support Fund, of £5.5 million, has already been established by the Department of which, to date, £1.9 million has been paid to small to medium organisations in addition to just over £0.5 million to individuals.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the support being offered by her Department to those who are facing a loss of employment through redundancy.

(AQW 7135/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is responsible for providing a Redundancy Support Service to employers and people being made redundant. The Department works with other departments and stakeholders to provide people facing redundancy with information and advice about benefits, help with constructing CVs, help them identify their transferrable skills and training needs, help with costs such as travel to interview expenses and help to search for and find a new job. The service offers virtual and face to face support to best meet the needs of both the employer and employees. In addition to Redundancy Factsheets, a Redundancy Clinic Webcast has been developed and is available on-line to provide people with information on benefits, supports and services available as they prepare for redundancy. Face to face Redundancy Clinics can be arranged at employer premises or any suitable location where social distancing requirements can be adhered to.

Immediate support is also available to impacted staff who make a claim for benefit as they will have a dedicated Work Coach who will provide ongoing tailored support to help them find work or retrain.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the departmental grants to which community and voluntary organisations can apply.

(AQW 7170/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Information on the Department's grant and other contracted programmes can be found on the Department's website at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/>

NICVA provides the GrantTracker funding database - <https://www.grant-tracker.org/>

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Communities when construction will start on the five complex needs, social housing bungalows, at Drumellan Gardens, Craigavon.

(AQW 7197/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Construction on the five complex needs social homes at Drumellan in Craigavon is programmed to start as part of the 2020/21 Social Housing Development Programme.

This land is currently under the ownership of the Housing Executive and before the site can be transferred to Choice Housing, an updated valuation has been requested from Land and Property Services and extinguishments are required to be processed.

Choice Housing is currently working through the procurement process for the construction works, and will be submitting an Application for Project Approval to the Housing Executive once the updated valuation has been provided.

Subject to these issues being resolved, it is anticipated that a start on-site can be achieved in the final quarter of this programme year.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities to detail the bids she has made to the Minister of Finance for funding which would provide support to the arts sector; and how much funding was received from these bids.

(AQW 7213/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Minister Hargey and I have provided an additional £5.5m for a Creative Support Fund for individuals and organisations across the arts sector. To date £1.9 million has been paid to small and medium organisations and just over £0.5 million to individuals. It is expected that the remaining £3.1 million will be confirmed by the end of October.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the implementation of a permanent solution following 19 February 2020 Court of Appeal judgment in the case of McKee & Others v Charity Commission for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7243/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The work in respect of the implications of the Judgment and actions required to bring confidence to the charity sector is nearing completion and I hope to make an announcement in the near future.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities how many Housing Executive properties in Carrickfergus are vacant.

(AQW 7346/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that, on 23 September 2020, its Housing stock Statistics for Carrickfergus were:-

Council Area	Housing Stock	Vacant Properties		
		Actionable	Non Actionable	Total
Carrickfergus	1,837	23	3	26

Note Actionable Voids are properties which are vacant while in the process of being allocated or are awaiting change of tenancy repairs. These can include properties where re-letting is not anticipated to be a problem and also properties which are vacant for a longer term which may be in an area which is difficult to let or the property type/condition is affecting the ability to allocate.

Non Actionable Voids are properties that are not available for allocation and are held vacant for operational reasons i.e. decanting purposes (where they are being used to house a tenant on a temporary basis pending works to their home) or for planned maintenance schemes and also properties which have been identified for sale or transfer or have been approved to be demolished.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Communities whether delivery of the Sub-Regional Stadia for Soccer programme will be led by her Department, Sport NI or another organisation.

(AQW 7434/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme. This will be followed by the further development of the Programme which will include consideration of the appropriate delivery mechanisms and bodies.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Communities to detail the timetable for delivery of the Sub-Regional Stadia for Soccer programme.

(AQW 7435/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme including the timetable for delivery.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Communities whether the strands in the Sub-Regional Stadia for Soccer programme have changed from those originally proposed in 2016.

(AQW 7436/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme including if there is a need to change the strands from those originally proposed.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her plans for the redevelopment of Casement Park.

(AQO 758/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Advancing completion of the Regional Stadia Programme, including Casement Park, is a key priority in the “New Decade, New Approach” agreement and I am fully committed to delivering on this priority for my Department.

The redevelopment of Windsor Park Stadium and Kingspan Stadium, have had a positive impact for the whole community, which go far beyond the benefits of sport alone. We need to deliver similar benefits to the area surrounding Casement Park, the wider Belfast area and beyond.

DfI officials have confirmed that they have substantively concluded their assessment of the application and they are presently considering a recently received objection to this complex application.

As you know there has, unfortunately, been a six year delay to the Casement Park project. Construction inflation arising from this delay, plus the need to redesign elements of the stadium, has resulted in significant increases to the cost estimate.

- Any cost estimates in excess of the approved budget, will need to be considered by the Executive.
- My officials are working with their counterparts in the Department of Finance and the GAA to finalise the Full Business Case.
- I have met with the UCGAA project board and have committed to ongoing, regular engagement to ensure that the project progresses at pace.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities when Housing Executive offices will be open to the public.
(AQO 759/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The ongoing safety of both Housing Executive customers and its staff is of the utmost importance to me. However I am also conscious that it is vital that the Housing Executive continues to deliver its services to those who need them, which will include some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

Whilst Housing Executive offices closed to the public in March in line with Government guidelines on the lockdown it was important to me that it continued to deliver its tenant services which it moved online and by telephone.

I was encouraged that from the 20 July 2020 the Housing Executive moved to reopen their local office network on a phased basis with it making arrangements to have at least one office per local Council area available for public access. All of its offices have been open to staff working on a rotational basis since July and I can confirm that all of its housing services are up and running.

The Housing Executive's offices are open on an appointment basis from 10am to 4pm, Monday to Friday, and as already stated each Region has provisions in place for customers seeking assistance. Within the Member's own constituency the Housing Executive office in Newtownards is open for appointments.

To continue to ensure the safety of both its staff and customers access to its offices is primarily by appointment only, and should anyone need to arrange an appointment they are to contact their local Housing Executive office. Face to face contact in the offices has and will continue to be facilitated using screened interview areas, whilst the wearing of face coverings is encouraged.

I am aware that the Housing Executive also wrote to all elected representatives, including members of this Assembly, with details of its services and how to make contact. I trust that Members found this information helpful and I would thank the Housing Executive for all of its efforts and commitment of its staff during this very difficult time.

I would conclude that should the Member have a particular issue he wishes to discuss in relation to the reopening of Housing Executive offices I would be happy for him to contact me and I will seek to address this with him.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer funding.
(AQO 760/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme is a priority in the New Decade New Approach Deal and I am committed to its implementation.

Currently my officials are undertaking work to provide a robust and up-to-date evidence base for the Programme. This includes a club survey and a series of strategic discussions with key stakeholders.

A full analysis of the outcomes of both of these exercises, along with benchmarking and research, will inform my proposals on the future of this Programme.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Communities what engagement she has had with housing providers to deliver a housing scheme suitable for those over 55 years of age in South Antrim.
(AQO 761/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any personal engagement with housing providers regarding any specific scheme for those over 55 years of age in the South Antrim Area.

I am aware, however, that the South Antrim constituency does have a need for suitable accommodation for those aged 55 and over. This has been reflected in my Department's Social Housing Development Programme, delivered through our Housing Executive and Housing Associations. In the year 2019/20 45 new homes suitable for older people were completed in South Antrim.

There are also 48 new homes currently planned via the Social Housing Development Programme to be completed in the area.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities to outline her Department's plan to reduce absolute poverty levels.
(AQO 762/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Work on the development of an Anti-Poverty Strategy to tackle poverty and its root causes is due to commence imminently in line with commitments made in New Decade, New Approach and in support of the delivery of the Executive's Programme for Government.

I intend to establish an Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel in the coming weeks. It will be tasked with making recommendations on the key themes and priorities that a new Anti-Poverty Strategy should contain.

The Strategy will be co-designed and co-produced with people who have direct experience of poverty, sector and academic experts, voluntary and community groups, councils, and other stakeholders including children and young people.

I have written to Executive colleagues to secure their commitment to the development of the Strategy, with a view to securing the participation of senior officials in a Cross-departmental Working Group which will provide a platform for all departments to contribute to the development of the Strategy and its action plan.

I am committed to ensuring the new Strategy is evidence based, developed with meaningful input and targets the areas of greatest need.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Communities what mechanisms are in place for private landlords, providing temporary accommodation to Housing Executive tenants, to make referrals for support to agencies on behalf of vulnerable people they are housing.

(AQO 763/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: When customers present as homeless to the Housing Executive it will attempt to identify any support needs that the applicant may have and identify and make referrals to suitable support providers in that area.

Where support needs are identified, the Housing Executive will attempt to make referrals to a range of external support services tailored to the individual needs of the customer where these are available. This is the same for people placed in all types of temporary accommodation, including single lets in the private rented sector.

Department of Education

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education what education facilities are in place for young persons under the age of 18 in custodial facilities.

(AQW 6797/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Education Authority (EA) provides education to young people in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre as part of its Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) service.

The EA has advised that the education programme has fully resumed following the summer break.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether the sponsoring body which produced the Ulster University Transforming Education: The Governance of Schools Briefing Paper is funded by the Integrated Education fund and in consequence what independence attaches to the paper.

(AQW 6852/17-22)

Mr Weir: I should explain that my Department had no role in commissioning this briefing paper, nor does it fund the Integrated Education Fund (IEF).

The IEF has advised that it:

- is one of several funders contributing to Ulster University's Transforming Education research initiative; and
- has no input in the commissioning of, and no influence in the content of, individual reports in the Transforming Education series of briefing papers.

In addition, the research team at Ulster University has advised it considers that the funding for the Transforming Education project does not interfere with its ethos of independent research.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) what personal protective equipment (PPE) the Education Authority has provided to staff within their offices; (ii) the jobs performed by the staff provided with PPE; and (iii) the cost of the same.

(AQW 6854/17-22)

Mr Weir: For Education Authority (EA) staff exclusively based in offices with no interaction with children and young people as part of their day to day activities, no PPE and face coverings are recommended, as the preferred mitigation of 2 metres social distancing is achievable. Therefore no PPE or face coverings have been supplied by EA to office based staff.

For office environments, enhanced cleaning is conducted of offices and desks and additional domestic grade cleaning supplies and hand sanitisers are available in shared spaces for personal use by staff using those facilities. This is not PPE, but does sometimes get referenced as PPE in discussions.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Education when school settings with nurture units will receive funding.

(AQW 6873/17-22)

Mr Weir: I can confirm that the 31 existing DE funded nurture groups have received their funding for 2020/21.

My officials are currently preparing the business case for the new nurture programme, including the proposed 15 new Nurture Groups. Funding will be allocated to relevant schools on completion and approval of this process.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education whether there has been a full resumption of education provision for young persons in custodial facilities in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6887/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) provides education to young people in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre as part of its Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) service.

The EA has advised that the education programme has fully resumed following the summer break.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered reviewing the effectiveness of the home test procedure.

(AQW 6914/17-22)

Mr Weir: The home testing kit arrangements are part of the UK Government's National Testing Initiative. They are administered by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England.

I accepted an invitation, extended to each of the Devolved Administrations, for all education settings in Northern Ireland to participate in this initiative. My Department subsequently published guidance for educational settings on the use of COVID-19 test kits which is available on the Departmental website.

My Department will continue to be led by the public health advice, and guidance relating to the COVID-19 context will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure it remains in line with the wider health position. However, any review specific to the effectiveness of the home test procedure would be for the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England to consider.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to fund further nurture units, particularly in rural areas.

(AQW 6918/17-22)

Mr Weir: On Friday 18 September 2020, I announced that more Nurture Groups will be established in primary schools, subject to business case approval, by January 2021, or as soon as possible thereafter.

The following criteria was used to select the 15 new proposed Nurture Groups, within the available budget and subject to business case approval:-

- (1) The school has:
 - (a) a high number of pupils with social services involvement (Children Looked After (CLA), child on the Child Protection Register (CPR) or child known to social services); and
 - (b) a high number of pupils living in areas of deprivation (as measured by the Extended Schools eligibility criteria);
- (2) There are no school sustainability issues;
- (3) The latest P1 and P2 enrolment number is at least 20 for each year group;
- (4) There is physical space within the school to facilitate a nurture room, with any minor works not expected to exceed £10-£15k; and
- (5) The school's Board of Governors and Senior Management Team are supportive of nurturing principles and whole school nurture practice.

The Education Authority is currently scoping the costs of works for the proposed schools.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to support substitute teachers who may have to self-isolate due to being in contact with another staff member or pupil who tests positive for COVID-19 and will not receive statutory sick pay during that time.

(AQW 6951/17-22)

Mr Weir: I can confirm that substitute teachers who are working in schools who may have to self-isolate due to being in contact with another staff member or pupil who tests positive for COVID-19 will be paid normal salary for the duration of their engagement at the school.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Education how many (i) free school meals; and (ii) uniform grant applications were not processed prior to the commencement of the school term.

(AQW 6961/17-22)

Mr Weir: Applications for Free School Meals and Uniform Grants are administered by the Education Authority and forms arrive daily either electronically or in hard copy. The tracking of the processing of the applications is largely a manual process. The data captured closest to the commencement of the school term is dated 2 September.

The Education Authority advises that on 2 September 3,823 Free school Meals and Uniform Grant applications were received but not processed. This figure relates to applications forms received from 10 August onwards. It is important to note that in all its communications, the EA states a six week processing time for FSM and Uniform Grant applications.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children whose parents have been asked to cover the cost of free school meals whilst waiting for their free school meals application to be processed.

(AQW 6962/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority issued a communication to principals on 27 August explaining that, given the unprecedented circumstances of COVID-19, it was possible that not all Free School Meals (FSM) applications would be processed in time for children returning to school and confirmed that any child presenting for FSM whose application had not been processed should be provided with a meal if necessary up to 11 September. Therefore no child presenting for FSM whose application had not been processed should have been asked to cover the cost of a meal during the period 1 – 11 September.

Since Monday 14th September, the Education Authority has been processing applications received in early September which is within the six week processing time for FSM and Uniform Grant applications. Therefore normal arrangements apply and entitlement to free school meals is awarded on the basis of a successful application.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to increase the number of nurture units in schools.

(AQW 7004/17-22)

Mr Weir: On Friday 18 September 2020, I announced that more Nurture Groups will be established in primary schools, subject to business case approval, by January 2021, or as soon as possible thereafter.

The following criteria was used to select the 15 new proposed Nurture Groups, within the available budget and subject to business case approval:-

- (6) The school has:
 - (c) a high number of pupils with social services involvement (Children Looked After (CLA), child on the Child Protection Register (CPR) or child known to social services); and
 - (d) a high number of pupils living in areas of deprivation (as measured by the Extended Schools eligibility criteria);
- (7) There are no school sustainability issues;
- (8) The latest P1 and P2 enrolment number is at least 20 for each year group;
- (9) There is physical space within the school to facilitate a nurture room, with any minor works not expected to exceed £10-£15k; and
- (10) The school's Board of Governors and Senior Management Team are supportive of nurturing principles and whole school nurture practice.

The Education Authority is currently scoping the costs of works for the proposed schools.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education what progress reports (i) he has requested of his Department's racial equality champion since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020; and (ii) his Department's racial equality champion has provided since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020.

(AQW 7029/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's Racial Equality Champion, who is also the Department's Equality Officer, is responsible for raising awareness and understanding of racial equality among colleagues and ensuring that it is taken into consideration in both policy and operational decisions. Officials within the Department, are reminded on a regular basis of the requirements of the statutory equality duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and an annual Equality and Good Relations Duties Progress Report is submitted to the Equality Commission.

Consequently there has been no need to produce specific progress reports, by the Department's racial equality champion, since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many transport applications from the Tullycarnet area have been submitted; and (ii) how many of those applications have been refused, broken down by (a) primary; and (b) post-primary, in the last five years.

(AQW 7133/17-22)

Mr Weir: The table below details the number of applications received by the Education Authority for home to school transport assistance for primary and post-primary pupils from the Tullycarnet area and the number or those that were rejected and approved in the last four years. The figures for 2016 are not available.

The Education Authority introduced an online 'eligibility checker' from the 2019/20 academic year, which enables parents to assess eligibility for transport assistance prior to making a formal application. This system was designed to inform and assist parents when making decisions when seeking admissions to school; as well as to reduce the proportion of ineligible applications.

2017	Total	Primary	Post Primary
Total number of applications	44	5	39
Rejected	29	2	27
Approved	15	3	12
2018			
Total number of applications	49	10	39
Rejected	37	10	27
Approved	12	0	12
2019			
Total number of applications	26	6	20
Rejected	16	4	12
Approved	10	2	8
2020			
Total number of applications	15	1	14
Rejected	9	1	8
Approved	6	0	6

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the New Decade, New Approach commitment to establish an external review into education provision, including (i) whether the required funding to carry out the review has been secured; (ii) when he anticipates the terms of reference to be drawn up; and (iii) how the terms of reference will be agreed upon.
(AQW 7144/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- i) The costs associated with the Independent Review of Education are to be finalised and will directly relate to the agreed scope and Terms of Reference. A small amount of funding has been set aside within the Department to enable the first stages of shaping a Review to commence in 2020/21. Further funding will need to be bid for as the Review will largely be undertaken in the financial year 2021/22.
- ii) Work is currently underway in the Department to develop a draft Terms of Reference and as part of this work consideration is being given to the approach to be taken to establishing the Review, including how a review panel would be selected and the necessary secretariat resourced.
- iii) It is my intention to submit the draft Terms of Reference to the Executive for consideration and agreement in due course.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Education whether the Education Authority Maintenance Helpdesk Line covering the Colin area of West Belfast is still staffed and operational.
(AQW 7168/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has confirmed that the Helpdesk Line covering the Colin area of West Belfast is still staffed and operational.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education how much money has been allocated for each individual school to assist with the COVID-19 restart costs.
(AQW 7190/17-22)

Mr Weir: To help support schools address many of the new pressures arising as a result of COVID-19, and to assist education settings to continue to provide a safe learning environment for our children and young people, my Department has received £70m additional funding, which includes £9.2m recently agreed by the Executive.

Individual allocations to schools to date are available on the Education Authority's website (<https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/school-finance/school-finance/funding-allocations-2020-21>) and this will continue to be updated as further allocations to schools are made.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education whether it is in line with Public Health advice to schools for pupils who have tested negative for COVID-19 to be told by their school that they have to isolate for 14 days before being allowed to return to school.

(AQW 7198/17-22)

Mr Weir: An updated version of the 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for schools and educational settings in Northern Ireland' was published on 24 September 2020.

Section 8 of this guidance provides details of the approach if a child tests negative for COVID-19 stating that "If the test is negative the child can return to school, as long as they have been fever free for 48 hours, and the household can return to normal activities. In this instance there are no further implications for the school".

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Education, in relation to Ballycraigy Primary School, to detail (i) how many hours a week the youth wing has been operational; (ii) how much has been spent on the youth wing; and (iii) the running cost of the youth wing, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7233/17-22)

Mr Weir: With regard to Ballycraigy Primary School Youth Wing I can advise that:

- (i) The Youth Wing is operational 6 hours per week – Monday and Thursday evenings 3 hours per night.
- (ii) In 2017/2018 a refurbishment was carried out at a cost of £337,000 plus £10,000 for furniture and equipment.
- (iii) Running cost of the youth wing in each of the last five years are as follows:

Year	Running Costs
2016/17	26,760 (incl. £7,500 high response maintenance costs)
2017/18	£19,203
2018/19	£21,369
2019/20	£22,151
2020/21	£7,170 (year to date)

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education for an update on the minor works application for a new traffic management system and re-modelling of the front drive and carpark area at St John the Baptist College, Portadown.

(AQW 7271/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are no projects on the current Minor Works Capital Delivery Programme for St John the Baptist College, Portadown in relation to traffic management.

The school submitted two minor works applications in relation to traffic management in 2016. Prior to the October 2017 Department of Education/Education Authority Joint Call for Minor Works, all existing minor work applications were assessed and only the most urgent health and safety schemes were identified to progress; neither of the applications from St John the Baptist College were deemed of sufficient priority to proceed.

Ahead of October 2017 Joint Call the school were advised that unless informed otherwise all other existing minor work applications would be nullified from 7 October 2017 and schools should reapply under the Joint Call. St John the Baptist College did submit six applications in the 2017 Joint Call however none of these were for traffic management.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the vacant property the Department currently holds; and (ii) their future use.

(AQW 7281/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not generally own properties such as schools. Instead, controlled schools are usually owned and managed by the Education Authority (EA) while non-controlled schools are owned and managed by the school trustees.

The Education Authority does hold a number of currently vacated premises and these are outlined in the attached table. This does not include details of former non-controlled schools, as these are the responsibility of the school trustees.

Name of School	Address	Future Use
Brookfield Special School	6 Halfpenny Gate Road, Moira, BT67 0GN	Legal issues delaying disposal
Ballykeigle Primary School	2 Ballykeigle Road, Comber, BT23	Disposal
Former Castle Gardens Primary School site	Portaferry Road, Newtownards	Legal issues delaying disposal

Name of School	Address	Future Use
Cottown Primary School	92 Cottown Road, Bangor, BT19 7QH	Alternative Educational Use
Derriaghy Primay School	14 Milltown Park, Lisburn, BT28 3TU	Disposal
Knockbreda High School	Wynchurch Road, Belfast	Alternative Educational Use
O'Neill Memorial Primary School	2 School Road, Crossnacreevy, BT5 7UA	Legal issues delaying disposal
Ravernette Primary School	2 Legacurry Road, Lisburn	Legal issues delaying disposal
School of Music	99 Donegall Pass, Belfast, BT7 1DR	Reversionary disposal
Ballygolan Primary School site	41-83 Serpentine Road, Newtownabbey, BT36 7HB	Disposal
Mount Gilbert College (land Only)	237 Ballygomartin Road, Belfast, BT13 3NL	Disposal
Riddell Memorial	Malvern Street, Belfast, BT13 1HW	Public Sector Transfer
Orangefield High School (Land Only)	Cameronian Drive, Belfast, BT5 6AW	Held for future Education provision
Suffolk Primary School (Land Only)	Blacks Road, Belfast, BT11 9LT	Potential Public Sector transfer
Former Cavehill Primary School (Land Only)	78 North Circular Road, Belfast, BT14 6TN	Small plot of land - disposal delayed due to revisionary trust
Former Forthriver PS (Land Only)	66-68 Ballygomartin Road, Belfast	Alternative Educational Use being considered
Former Glencairn Youth Club Site (Land Only)	Forthriver Parade, Belfast	Alternative Educational Use being considered
Bruslee Primary School (Former Class Centre)	86 Belfast Road, Ballyclare BT39 9LS	Legal issues delaying disposal
Causeway School	52 Causeway Road, Bushmills, BT57 8SU	Legal issues delaying disposal
Garvagh High School	1 Coleraine Road, Garvagh, Coleraine, BT51 5HP	Disposal
Garvagh Youth Centre	157A Main Street, Garvagh, Coleraine, BT51 5AB	Reversionary disposal
Magherafelt Old Primary School	7 Queens Avenue, Magherafelt, BT45 6BU	Alternative Educational Use
Tullybane Primary School	Tullykittagha Road, Cloughmills	Legal issues delaying disposal
Tullygrawley Primary School	Dunminning, Tullygrawley/ Ballywatermoy Cross Junction, Ballymena	Legal issues delaying disposal
Upper Buckna Primary School	103 Carnalbanagh Road, Broughshane, BT42 4NT	Legal issues delaying disposal
Former Parkhall Integrated College site	6 Birch Hill Road, Antrim BT41 2QH	Disposal
Cambridge House Grammar School Plot 1	Land at Dans Road, Ballymena BT42 2EH	Disposal
Cambridge House Grammar School Plot 2	Land at Dans Road, Ballymena BT42 2EH	Disposal
Loanends Former PS - Land at	192 Seven Mile Straight, Crumlin, BT29 4YR	Disposal
Portrush YC and adjacent Out Centre	Dunluce Avenue, Portrush BT56 8BF	Legal issues delaying disposal
Whiteabbey Manitenance Depot	9a Abbey Street, Newtownabbey, BT37 0AG	Disposal. Possible Community Asset transfer

Name of School	Address	Future Use
Ballykeel Playing Fields	18 Crebilly Road, Ballymena BT42 4DN	Legal issues delaying disposal
Ballymoney Music Centre	23 Charles Street, Ballymoney, BT53 6DX	Public Sector Transfer
Bushmills Outdoor Educational Centre	7 Priestland Road, Bushmills, BT57 8QP	Alternative Educational Use being considered
Bellarena Primary School	260 Seacoast Road, Limavady, BT39 0JB	Reversionary disposal
Ebrington Primary School site	Ulster Avenue, Lapwing, Londonderry, BT47 6LH	Disposal
Culnady Primary School	79 Ballymacilur Road, Upperlands, Maghera BT46 5TT	Disposal
Erganagh Primary School	7 Listymore Road, Castledery, Co Tyrone, BT81 7JG	Disposal
Sunnylands - Land at	Hawthorne Avenue, Sunnylands, Carrickfergus, BT38 8ED	Legal issues delaying disposal
Faughan Valley High School	35 Drumahoe Road, Drumahoe, Londonderry, BT47 3SD	Public Sector interest being explored
Strabane/Liskey Road	4 Liskey Road, Strabane, BT82 8NW	Alternative Educational Use being considered
Ardnabannon Outdoor Educational Centre	3-5 Ardnabannon Rd, Castlewellsan BT31 9EN	Possible Community Asset Transfer re part of site
Dromore Central Primary School	2 Banbridge Road, Dromore, BT25 1AD	Public Sector part use being explored
Killowen Outdoor Educational Centre	7 Killowen Rd, Rostrevor, Newry BT34 3AF	Alternative Educational Use being considered
Collone Primary School	7 Redrock Road, Armagh, BT60 2BE	Reversionary disposal
Toberlane Primary School	20 Toberlane Road, Cookstown, BT80 9QZ	Reversionary disposal
Annaghmore Primary School	57 Annaghmore Road, Portadown BT62 1LZ	Reversionary disposal
Lisfearthy Primary School	64 Farriter Road, Dungannon BT70 1SH	Alternative Educational Use being considered
Lisnaskea Transport Centre	Mullynascorthy, Enniskillen BT92 0NZ	Alternative Educational Use being considered

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will ensure all pupils who have had resit examinations cancelled during the COVID-19 pandemic will receive a refund.

(AQW 7282/17-22)

Mr Weir: CCEA have advised that they are considering the issue of examination fee charges and will prepare an options paper for submission to my Department for consideration, following the announcement on grading for this year's exams.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 6658/17-22, whether his Department will be carrying out school crossing patrol reassessments of those schools who will now receive a 20mph limit.

(AQW 7361/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) is responsible for the assessment of the need for school crossing patrols. The EA will continue to conduct routine reassessments of the need for a school crossing patrol where a position becomes vacant but does not currently intend to reassess school crossing patrols operating at schools that have recently had their speed limits reduced to 20mph.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 6594/17-22 and 6596/17-22, to explain how public disclosure of the budget and spend to date on the EA One Project would be commercially prejudicial to the EA as this information must already be within the knowledge of the contracted party.

(AQW 7368/17-22)

Mr Weir: The budget for the EA One Project is as set out in the approved business case. This covers the design, build, implementation and ongoing live service costs of the new Oracle system over a ten year period through to April 2027.

If the system supplier were to be made aware of the overall budgetary position and the spend to date across all budget lines (and by implication the remaining project budget), this would be commercially prejudicial for the Education Authority, particularly when it comes to negotiating ongoing and future contractual change control.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education what plans are in place to support year 12 students, who could be faced with taking exams for last year alongside this years exams to complete their GCSE qualifications.

(AQW 7373/17-22)

Mr Weir: Decisions regarding arrangements for examinations in 2021, including those for Year 12, will take account of responses received to the CCEA consultation which closed on 7 September. The emphasis in the CCEA proposals is on reducing the burden of assessment.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Education to detail the total investment by his Department in each school, broken down by parliamentary constituency, in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 7376/17-22)

Mr Weir: The capital investment for major projects in the last 3 years, including executive funded major capital works, Fresh Start agreement funded works, School Enhancement Projects and the Strule project, broken down by constituency, is detailed in the table below.

Constituency	2017/18 £'m	2018/19 £'m	2019/20 £'m
Belfast East	0.10	2.89	0.47
Belfast North	0.81	3.46	2.53
Belfast South	3.23	2.72	2.06
Belfast West	8.08	0.36	3.28
East Antrim	1.75	3.63	3.31
East Londonderry	1.05	3.77	5.45
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	18.40	8.12	6.06
Foyle	7.29	4.88	0.55
Lagan Valley	4.12	1.65	0.41
Mid Ulster	2.05	0.57	0.74
Newry & Armagh	2.17	0.92	1.92
North Antrim	7.82	2.05	4.32
North Down	0.71	0.03	0.04
South Antrim	9.55	1.41	0.08
South Down	3.53	0.41	1.02
Strangford	1.84	0.50	0.62
Upper Bann	6.74	1.19	0.74
West Tyrone	13.56	18.54	20.09
Total	92.80	57.09	53.69

The figures above do not include capital spend of £63.79m, £84.18m, £82.94m on minor works across the estate in each of the years shown.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to introduce financial provisions to support substitute teachers out of work due to having to self-isolate with COVID-19.

(AQW 7422/17-22)

Mr Weir: I can confirm that substitute teachers who are working in schools when they are required to self-isolate will be paid normal salary for the period of their engagement at the school.

On 19 May 2020, I announced the Income Support Scheme for Substitute Teachers to provide financial support to substitute teachers who no longer had access to work, as a result of the sudden closure of schools during April to June 2020. With schools re-opened, I can confirm that at present I have no plans to introduce a further income support scheme for substitute teachers.

It is also the case that the Engage programme I announced on 23 September will be likely to create additional work for substitute teachers. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/education-minister-launches-ps112m-engage-programme>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh, Strabane.
(AQW 7442/17-22)

Mr Weir: Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh, Strabane, featured in the major capital works announcement of January 2013 for a seven class base school and nursery.

The Department approved the Stage 3 Developed Design Report, submitted by the Integrated Design Team, on 15 May 2020. Stage 4 (Technical) design and the first stage of the process to appoint a contractor is now in progress.

A planning application was submitted in June 2019 and a decision on this application is awaited.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether he will commission an independent review of the GCSE, AS and A level grades and appeal process 2020.
(AQW 7445/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have agreed to take forward an independent review of the CCEA awarding arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020. My officials are currently finalising the Terms of Reference that will set out the remit of the review.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education (i) when Education Authority Area Planning will recommence; and (ii) for an update on the development proposal for St John the Baptist College, Portadown.
(AQW 7446/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- i The Education Authority's Education Committee met for the first time this academic year on 10 September 2020 as part of its arrangements to recommence area planning. My Department is also finalising arrangements for the recommencement of meetings of the Area Planning Steering Group, with the first meeting scheduled tentatively for 21 October 2020.
- ii A development proposal (DP 646) for St John the Baptist College was scheduled to go to the Education Authority's Education Committee in March 2020 for consideration and clearance for publication, however, the proposal did not reach this stage. It was subsequently intended that the proposal would go to the April meeting, however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the proposal was unable to be progressed further. When Area Planning is fully resumed, the proposal for St John the Baptist College will be considered.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how much the decision to delay transfer tests to 2021 and associated administrative procedures will cost the (i) Department of Education; and (ii) Education Authority.
(AQW 7447/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has considered whether any administrative costs will arise in relation to the decision of AQE Ltd and PPTC to move their assessments to January 2021 and has concluded that no additional costs are likely to materialise.

The Education Authority (EA) is working through a number of options with regard to the 2021 admissions process. At this juncture EA has advised that the post-primary transfer process will be digitised for 2021; however it is currently scoping which specific elements of the process are included/excluded given the timeframe and COVID-19 restrictions. Until this work concludes EA would not be in a position to state with certainty what additional costs (if any) will be incurred as a result of the delay of transfer tests to January 2021. The decision to digitise post-primary admissions is unconnected with the timing of entrance tests and reflects the need to streamline and improve the post-primary admission process in a similar manner to the improvements already introduced for pre-school and primary school admissions.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what steps he intends to take to rectify the funding inequity between schools with high levels of Free School Meals and those with low uptake.
(AQW 7461/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department and schools have made ongoing efforts to encourage uptake of Free School Meals. My appointment in July 2020 of an Expert Panel to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background may offer an opportunity to look at this issue.

In addition to this, the Department was undertaking a Review of the Common Funding Scheme (RCFS) as part of the wider Education Transformation Programme, prior to the onset of COVID-19. The aim of the Review is ultimately to provide a suite of evidence-based options/potential changes to the Scheme which will form the basis of advice to me, as Education Minister. The Targeting Social Needs factors within the Common Funding Formula, which are primarily based on a school's level of Free School Meal Entitlement fall within the scope of this Review.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education to detail the building resilience component of his latest funding announcement Engage.

(AQW 7469/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Engage programme allows schools to secure additional qualified teachers to provide one to one, small group or team teaching support for pupils that would most benefit from additional support following the Covid-19 lockdown.

We have not advised schools what to deliver or how to deliver the programme therefore the nature of provision will differ from school to school within the aim and objectives of the programme. This is on the basis that schools know their pupils best and their pupils will benefit from teachers using their professional judgement to decide upon relevant priorities and the pupils most in need.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education for an update on work undertaken by his Department around the introduction of a flexible school starting age.

(AQW 7485/17-22)

Mr Weir: As you are aware, my Department undertook a consultation previously on proposals to defer the compulsory school starting age, in exceptional circumstances. I have asked officials to revisit the work undertaken to allow me to consider proposals on the most appropriate way forward. This work is ongoing.

I am sure you will appreciate, that until I have fully assessed the options presented, including potential options for bringing forward legislation if required, I am not yet at the position to outline how I plan to proceed on this matter.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education what funding bids he has made to the Department of Finance for the development of the Childcare Strategy, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 7486/17-22)

Mr Weir: There is currently no funding within the Department of Education baseline for the commitments outlined in New Decade, New Approach to develop an Executive Childcare Strategy or an early education and childcare offer for children aged 3-4.

As part of a budget gathering exercise for 2020-23, commissioned in 2019, the Department of Education had placed an indicative bid of £15m (2020/21), £30m (2021/22) and £45m (2022/23) for the development and implementation of the Executive Childcare Strategy, including the early education and childcare offer.

In line with the required budget review for 2020/21, the bid for childcare in the 2020/21 financial year was subsequently revised to £6m in May 2020 to reflect the fact that work on progressing the Executive Childcare Strategy was temporarily paused. This was due to the necessary focus of the Childcare Unit on the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The bid of £6m was submitted as part of the June monitoring round but, to date, there has been no funding provided to my Department for the Executive Childcare Strategy in 2020/21 financial year.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education for an update on the provision of a new school build for Priory Integrated College, Holywood.[R]

(AQW 7490/17-22)

Mr Weir: Priory Integrated College has been selected for a major capital investment project to improve or replace its existing accommodation. The project will cater for the school's current approved enrolment of 600 pupils.

In February 2020 the EA successfully completed the appointment of an Integrated Consultant Team to carry out the design of the proposed Priory Integrated College. The business case was approved by the Department of Finance (DoF) in August 2020. This identified the preferred option as a new build school at a site on Redburn Road in Holywood.

The Integrated Consultant Team is now working on the early stages of the design process.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered bringing forward an electronic application for the admissions process for children transferring from primary to post-primary schools.

(AQW 7522/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority will be implementing a digital process for post-primary admissions in 2021.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education what measures he intends to put in place to ensure that Special Educational Needs children will not be left without a school place come the notification date in 2021.

(AQW 7523/17-22)

Mr Weir: I recently established a Special Educational Needs (SEN) Governance Group, chaired by the Permanent Secretary and including the Education Authority (EA), to provide strategic oversight to a programme of SEN improvements.

As part of that the EA is currently preparing a report on lessons learnt from the SEN admissions process this year and in particular the use of Interim Specialist Resource Provisions. This report will inform discussions with the Department on the way forward for future years.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education how he intends to further improve his Department's communications to parents and schools regarding guidance on the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 7525/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department established the Education Restart Programme, which has worked alongside a wide range of stakeholders, to put in place the detailed measures and guidance to enable the safe reopening of schools. I recognise and appreciate the very significant work that has been undertaken by school leaders to enable the return of schools. This has also involved considerable work by and with the wider education profession, trade unions, parents and pupils.

I acknowledge the importance of ensuring that schools and parents have clear information and up to date advice in relation to operating in the COVID-19 context. An updated version of the 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for schools and educational settings in Northern Ireland' was published on 29 September 2020. This guidance provides a framework for how schools and education settings in Northern Ireland can operate in an ongoing COVID-19 environment, with the aim of ensuring broad consistency and equity across local areas, but is sufficiently flexible to allow education.

My Department will continue to be led by the public health advice, and guidance will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure it remains in line with the wider health position. I will ensure that any revised guidance or information is clearly communicated to schools, parents/carers and pupils.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to explain the first corporate goal in his Department's business plan when it alludes to "ensuring that fair grades are awarded in qualifications entered".

(AQW 7526/17-22)

Mr Weir: The goal reflects my priority that, despite the cancellation of exams in 2020, all young people in Northern Ireland schools should be awarded fair and robust outcomes for qualifications entered in the 2019/20 academic year to enable them to progress onto the next stage of their lives.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how his Department is supporting and monitoring the provision of remote learning by schools.

(AQW 7527/17-22)

Mr Weir: School leaders and teachers will use their professional expertise, informed by their inherent understanding of the children in their school community, to provide remote learning content that is suited to the needs, age and circumstances of their pupils

Practical advice and support is available to schools from their COVID-19 Link Officer and from both the Education and Training Inspectorate and Education Authority more generally.

In addition, my Department has provided guidance for schools on both Remote Learning and Curriculum Planning and Blended Learning for 2021/21. Further resources, guidance materials and case studies have also been produced by my Department's Continuity of Learning Project. A series of Teacher Professional Learning webinars on issues pertinent to the COVID-19 context have been developed through the Continuity of Learning Programme and delivered via C2k's Education Network Service. This has included training for practitioners on C2k applications and functionality, showcasing the use of eLearning tools to support remote learning.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the development proposal for the longer term expansion of educational provision at St John the Baptist College, Portadown; and (ii) when he expects to make the current temporary provision permanent.

(AQW 7602/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- i A development proposal (DP 646) to establish Key Stage 4 provision at St John the Baptist College, Portadown was scheduled to go to the Education Authority's Education Committee in March 2020 for consideration and clearance for publication, however, the proposal did not reach this stage. It was subsequently intended that the proposal would go to the April meeting, however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the proposal was unable to be progressed further. When Area Planning is fully resumed, the proposal for St John the Baptist College will be considered.
- ii. The permanent designation of St John the Baptist College as an 11-19 school requires an approved DP.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education when Education Authority Behavioural Therapists will be resuming their duties of assessing and observing children within their classrooms.

(AQW 7607/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has been working closely with schools, Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCT) and the Public Health Agency to develop local structures and planning groups to support the education restart and health rebuild model, for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). This work will enable services and therapies to safely recommence in schools, as soon as feasibly possible, in line with the Department's 'New School Day' Guidance, schools' Covid measures and public health advice.

The EA have been liaising with schools to facilitate, with appropriate risk assessment, the resumption of direct intervention services safely in schools, as soon as possible. Remote support, advice and guidance continues to be available from the EA.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, in light of the COVID-19 disruption, whether he has any plans to direct the Education Authority to recruit more admissions tribunal members and train more of its staff to service such tribunals for next year.

(AQW 7610/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) is currently in the process of finalising the plan for the operation of the 2021 post-primary admissions process. A significant part of this plan focuses on the administration of the admissions appeals tribunals and their efficient operation within the new timetable. The EA recognises the importance of admissions appeals for families and is working with my Department to ensure that optimum resources are in place to facilitate the admission appeals tribunals. This will include a review of the current administrative resource in the EA to support tribunals and the number of tribunal panel members to facilitate hearings throughout summer 2021. The plan will be completed in autumn 2020 to allow sufficient time to communicate the detail of the process to schools and parents.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the additional resources he intends to deploy to schools to alleviate the heightened stress levels that exam pupils are already reporting to elected representatives, due to the fact that neither teachers nor pupils have been informed of the changes to the exam and grade awarding process for A, AS and GCSE levels for the 2020/21 academic year.

(AQW 7611/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department has been working with a range of stakeholders to develop a Framework to promote the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people who may be at risk or showing signs of needing further help. £5m recurrent funding has been made available by my Department to support mental health and wellbeing within the education sector, and the Health Minister has agreed to provide an additional £1.5m on a recurrent basis from 2021/22 onwards.

My officials are working with CCEA to finalise arrangements for 2021 examinations as a matter of urgency.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of whether the exam regulator role and the exam awarding body should be separated.

(AQW 7612/17-22)

Mr Weir: There is currently a separation of these roles within the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. However, should the review which I have commissioned of the summer 2020 awarding arrangements raise any concerns about the present arrangements I will give careful consideration to appropriate action to address those concerns.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the openness and transparency of the exam grade appeal process at GCSE, AS and A level.

(AQW 7613/17-22)

Mr Weir: As part of the 2020 alternative awarding arrangements, I directed CCEA to develop an appeals process, aligned as far as possible with approaches adopted in England and Wales. CCEA developed and consulted on proposals for an appeals process and published the outcome. CCEA subsequently published an updated process which took into account the changes to the awarding arrangements in August 2020.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Education how he decided the model used to allocate the Engage Programme funding.

(AQW 7634/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Engage Programme was conceived along the lines of the very successful Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Signature Programme, which enabled schools to employing qualified teachers to support children's learning.

A Working Group was set up to develop and appraise options for the design of the programme, consisting of representatives from the Department of Education, Education Authority, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and Northern Ireland Teaching Council. The Working Group consulted with a range of key stakeholders, sectoral bodies, experienced school practitioners and Trade Unions and the programme reflects the outcome of this consultation and engagement.

Following feedback it was decided that the programme would provide support for all primary and post-primary schools to limit any long-term adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on educational standards by supporting pupils' learning and engagement on their return to school through provision of high quality one to one, small group or team teaching support in every primary and post-primary school in Northern Ireland.

The Working Group established a model to allocate funding to all primary and post primary schools. As the potential for lost learning may be particularly acute for pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the criteria were set to offer the greatest level of support to schools with higher concentrations of disadvantaged pupils, measured by levels of pupils entitled to free school meals.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Education to detail the consultation process for the Engage Programme funding and the feedback received.

(AQW 7635/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Engage Programme was conceived along the lines of the very successful Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Signature Programme, which enabled schools to employing qualified teachers to support children's learning.

A Working Group was set up to develop and appraise options for the design of the programme, consisting of representatives from the Department of Education, Education Authority, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and Northern Ireland Teaching Council. The Working Group consulted with a range of key stakeholders, sectoral bodies, experienced school practitioners and Trade Unions and the programme reflects the outcome of this consultation and engagement.

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Mr Allen asked the Minister of Education to detail the stakeholders his Department engaged with before determining the criteria to allocate the Engage Programme funding.

(AQW 7636/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Engage Programme was conceived along the lines of the very successful Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Signature Programme, which enabled schools to employing qualified teachers to support children's learning.

A Working Group was set up to develop and appraise options for the design of the programme, consisting of representatives from the Department of Education, Education Authority, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and Northern Ireland Teaching Council. The Working Group consulted with a range of key stakeholders, sectoral bodies, experienced school practitioners and Trade Unions and the programme reflects the outcome of this consultation and engagement.

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Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education whether consideration has been given to enabling multi-modal travel on bus and train for pupils issued with a Translink Travel Pass, in light of current travel challenges relating to COVID-19.[R]

(AQW 7662/17-22)

Mr Weir: The current contractual arrangements between EA and Translink facilitates the issue of either a bus or train ticket for each pupil.

It is for the EA to determine the most suitable method of assisting pupils and in doing so they are required to have due regard to efficiency and economy.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to extend the mid-term break period at Halloween; and when this will be formally notified to all schools.

(AQW 7692/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has no plans to amend or extend the agreed and published school holiday arrangements for the mid-term break.

The harmonised dates, agreed by the Education Authority and key stakeholders, take into account issues such as school transport and meal arrangements, are 29 and 30 October 2020. While these dates provide a basis from which to determine their mid-term calendar, schools have the discretion to set their own operational days and do not therefore need to adhere strictly to the dates set by the Authority.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, in terms of measuring educational underachievement, for his assessment of the need to extend the criteria beyond 5 GCSE's including English and Maths.

(AQW 7806/17-22)

Mr Weir: I announced the appointment of an Expert Panel on educational underachievement linked to socio-economic disadvantage on 28 July 2020. The panel's work started in September 2020 and will culminate in a costed Action Plan by 31 May 2021.

I do not wish to pre-empt the panel's work but I am sure that they will wish to consider the issue of how we as a system, and as a society, measure success.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the Northern Ireland Audit Office's 2020 report on the provision of support for children with Special Educational Needs; and explain what is being done to ensure that the recommendations made in the 2017 Audit Office report will be implemented in full.

(AQW 7823/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Northern Ireland Audit Office's (NIAO) 2020 "Impact Review of Special Educational Needs" is to be considered by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) on Thursday 15 October 2020.

I will work with the Department of Finance to ensure any issues raised by the PAC Report are addressed appropriately. The Department is working closely with the Education Authority on ensuring the recommendations made in the 2017 Audit Office Report are implemented in full.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to roll out the pilot of North Belfast Extended Schools in other Neighbourhood Renewal Areas or areas across the north.

(AQW 7938/17-22)

Mr Weir: Whilst there would be merit in exploring similar approaches in other disadvantaged areas, due to budget constraints, there are no plans to roll out either the North Belfast Primary Principals Support Project or the Full Service Extended Schools programme (based at the Boys' and Girls' Model Schools) elsewhere at this current time.

I intend to bring forward a public consultation on proposals to review the existing Extended Schools programme which provides financial support (£9.1m) to almost 500 schools serving our most disadvantaged communities across Northern Ireland. The timing of the consultation on the new replacement programme entitled Partners in Education will be dependent on developments around the evolving Covid-19 situation but is expected to be during the 2020/21 academic year.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education whether he has made any bids to the Minister of Finance to provide free sanitary products in schools in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7945/17-22)

Mr Weir: Officials are continuing to progress work in relation to the provision of free sanitary products in schools. That work has reached draft Business Case stage.

A bid to the Department of Finance may follow if the Business Case is approved but that will be subject to Ministerial and Executive approval since "period poverty" is a cross-cutting issue.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to outline the actions his Department is taking to ensure all examinations proceed in 2021.

(AQO 780/17-22)

Mr Weir: Ensuring that exams are able to take place in 2021 is a key priority for me. My Department commissioned CCEA to develop proposals for examination arrangements in 2021. Following a short public consultation, CCEA is now working with the Department to finalise arrangements as a matter of urgency, as well as developing contingencies to address a range of potential public health scenarios.

My Department also continues to engage with the other jurisdictions to ensure alignment of approaches as far as possible, in order to make sure that Northern Ireland qualifications are recognised as having the same value as qualifications from elsewhere.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education what discussions his Department has had with principals and the Education Authority to ascertain and monitor the impact COVID-19 restrictions have had on the mental wellbeing of school children.

(AQO 781/17-22)

Mr Weir: I appreciate that the Covid-19 crisis has brought an added dimension to the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our school children.

I can advise that my Department has met regularly with the Principals Practitioners Group, the Education Authority and other stakeholders as part of the Education Restart Programme.

That engagement has helped shape the nature of guidance developed and published by the Department and the support services put in place by the Education Authority.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education what assessment has been made of learning losses due to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQO 782/17-22)

Mr Weir: The disruption of recent months has been felt by pupils across Northern Ireland. Every child and young person will have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic uniquely. The longer-term impact on learning is, therefore, difficult to estimate.

As schools reopened, the emphasis has been on ensuring children have good emotional health and wellbeing, are engaged and motivated to learn and have the tools and skills they require for learning.

Using normal formative assessment approaches within the classroom, schools have been working to understand where pupils are in regard to their learning after the period of remote education. This approach helps pupils feel confident and secure in what they already know whilst ascertaining individual learning needs.

I am confident that schools are identifying and supporting those pupils who are experiencing difficulties in engaging with learning. In addition, my Department's **Engage Programme will provide funding for child centred one to one, small group or team teaching support w to pupils identified by schools as most benefiting from additional support following the Covid-19 school closures. ETI will carry out an evaluation of the programme.**

Once pupils have returned to the school environment for a sustained period of time, we may as a system need to take stock to more accurately ascertain how much the COVID-19 interruption has affected learning. I will be liaising in the coming months with my professional advisors in CCEA to consider options around this.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education for an update on current development proposals for schools in East Londonderry. **(AQO 787/17-22)**

Mr Weir: Area Planning activity including work on Development Proposals (DPs) was paused on 3 April 2020, with the exception of special education provision in mainstream and special school settings, so that all available resources could be redeployed in support of the Department's emergency response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a consequence the Department has extended the statutory objection period following publication of some DPs to provide more time for interested parties to comment.

When DP activity was paused there were three published proposals relating to two schools in East Londonderry.

DP 588 to close Ballyhackett Primary School was published by the EA on 3 September 2019. This proposal was initially delayed as the school decided to bring forward a proposal to Transform to Controlled Integrated status.

DP 644 for Ballyhackett Primary School to 'Transform' was published by the EA on 24 March 2020. The Department has extended the statutory objection period for this proposal until 9 November 2020.

DP 616 to increase the admissions and enrolment number at Drumrane Primary School with effect from 1 September 2020 was published by the EA on 25 February 2020. The Department has extended the statutory objection period for this proposal until 12 October 2020.

Decisions on these DPs will be made as soon as possible after the conclusion of the respective objection periods.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made regarding the development of new school buildings and facilities for Carrickfergus Academy.

(AQO 783/17-22)

Mr Weir: Carrickfergus Academy has not been announced to advance in design in any recent major capital announcement. The Education Authority (EA), as the school's managing authority, submitted a proposal for the school under the latest major capital works call, and whilst it passed the Gateway assessment it did not score as highly as the 6 post primary schools which were announced.

The school was ranked number 12 on the prioritised list of post primary schools, from which 6 schools were announced.

However, the school's ranking in this competition does not necessarily mean that it would be placed in a similar position in a future competition. The protocol is reviewed and potentially revised after each call and the list of schools being scored will change. It is not therefore straightforward to predict where a school would be ranked in a future competition.

I would encourage Carrickfergus Academy to liaise with the EA to discuss the possibility of a new application being lodged on behalf of Carrickfergus Academy under a future major capital call.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Education what progress is being made on plans to refurbish Glenwood Primary School. (AQO 784/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am pleased to advise that a business case to provide major capital investment in Glenwood Primary School was approved by the Department of Finance in June 2020.

Given the lack of alternative sites within the Shankill area for a new build, the preferred option involves the refurbishment of the existing listed building in addition to the rebuilding of the 1960s extension at the current school site.

An Integrated Consultant Team, Hamilton Architects, were appointed in July 2020 to undertake all of the design work and manage the project from cradle to grave. The team are currently undertaking investigatory surveys to assess the fabric of the listed building. They are also engaging with Historic Environment Division on the principles of the development. This will inform the progression of the RIBA Stage Two (Concept) Design for the school.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Education whether he has directed the Education Authority to amend the transport policy to address inconsistencies between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 pupils in terms of statutory transport assistance. (AQO 785/17-22)

Mr Weir: There has been no change to the Department's home to school transport policy since it was last revised in 2009 and I have given no direction or instruction to the Education Authority with regard to transport provision for pupils at Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what factors are considered by his Department when deciding on new school builds. (AQO 786/17-22)

Mr Weir: Once nominations are received from Managing Authorities, sectoral bodies and Voluntary Grammar Schools each application is assessed under the agreed Protocol developed for each call.

A total of one hundred and twenty points were available in the scoring element of the latest major capital works call assessment process. That is the current position.

Fifteen points were awarded to schools that had gone through recent amalgamations. This was determined as schools that had been re-configured as part of a Development Proposal that had enabled rationalisation of a number of schools in an area since the introduction of Area Planning in 2011.

Fifteen points were awarded to schools that are operating on a split site.

Both the suitability and condition elements, were assessed through surveys carried out on the applicant schools. A total of twenty five points were available for suitability and a total of five points were available for access to outdoor space. These elements were assessed against the degree to which accommodation meets the requirements for delivery of the curriculum as set out in the Department's Building Handbooks. A total of thirty points were available for condition of existing accommodation and a further twenty points were available for reliance on temporary accommodation. Temporary accommodation was determined as modular accommodation over five years old.

A total of five points were available for the percentage of pupils with a level 5 statement of special educational need and a total of five points were available for the percentage of pupils allocated free school meals.

Following completion of the scoring element of the process schools were placed in ranked order.

Department of Finance

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance to detail the actions her Department is taking to stop retail bank closures in towns and villages. (AQW 6753/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Unfortunately financial services are reserved with the British Government. However my officials are in regular contact with UK Finance, the representative body for the banking industry locally, and they have emphasised how important it is that banks adhere to the requirements set out by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) when considering the closure of branches. This includes providing clear communication with customers of how else banking services can be accessed, and putting in place alternative access arrangements where possible.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance whether the Committee for Finance has been given all the papers from the Department relating to the reported joint order with the Irish government for personal protective equipment, including emails, letters and other means of communication used by officials. (AQW 6771/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Committee for Finance has been provided with the information requested.

I attended the Finance Committee on 8 April 2020 and answered questions in relation to the joint order for PPE.

I am satisfied that the information has been handled in accordance with the Department's information and records management policy.

The Department's information and records management policy is available online at <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/dof-records-and-information-management-policy-and-retention-and-disposal-schedule>.

Information has also been provided in response to AQW 5696/17-22.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance (i) for details and the process of the Department's information policy; (ii) how this was applied to the Committee for Finance request on 8 April 2020 for all papers relating to the reported joint order with the Irish government for personal protective equipment; and (iii) who made the decisions to release some emails and to withhold other emails; and (iv) on what basis the decision was made.

(AQW 6772/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Refer to response to AQW 6771/17-22.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he is considering funding directed at green recovery initiatives.

(AQW 6823/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive has made an allocation to the Department for the Economy to fund a demonstrator project to kick start the hydrogen economy in the North.

The overall project, which this bid supports, will secure initial technology and equipment for initial projects within the 'Power to X' portfolio – in particularly highly innovative membrane-free electrolyser and demonstration hydrogen fuel vehicles.

The project will help to build momentum in the hydrogen economy, acting as a stimulus for further activity and resulting economic impact, potentially creating many new jobs in the coming years.

The Executive considered this bid and allocated £1.4 million to the department. There is a further £4.8 million capital expenditure which the department will fund from its existing budget allocation.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance how many bids for finance have been made by each Executive Minister since the restoration of the Executive; and how many of these bids he has accepted.

(AQW 6857/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Since the restoration of the Executive there have been a number of financial exercises where departments have registered pressures. I announced the outcome of the final monitoring round of 2019-20, the January Monitoring round in the Assembly on 27 January 2020 and the tables that accompanied my statement included both bids submitted by department and the allocations made. Further allocations were announced on 17 February as funding became available but these related to bids already submitted.

The Executive agreed a Budget for 2020-21 which I announced in the Assembly on 31 March 2020. While, in reaching this agreed outcome, there was ongoing and iterative engagement with all departments to understand their financial position, there were no bids submitted as part of this process.

In 2020-21 there has been one formal in-year monitoring round, I announced the outcome of the June Monitoring round in the Assembly on 30 June and the tables that accompanied my statement showed the bids submitted and allocations made.

Alongside the formal in-year monitoring round process the Executive has been dynamically and swiftly allocating funding to deal with the impact of COVID-19. I announced allocations on 9 April, 19 May, 13 August, 10 September and 24 September. These were all based upon information that departments provided identifying pressures and proposing interventions. This has been an iterative process and as such there is not a definitive list of bids.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance how many bids for finance he has received from the Minister of the Economy since the restoration of the Executive; and how many of these bids he has accepted.

(AQW 6858/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 6857 /17-22

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance whether businesses who pay rates via their rent, as stated in their lease agreement, were eligible for the £10,000 Small Business Grant as a response to COVID-19, including those rent space within a shared building.

(AQW 7018/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The essential eligibility criteria for the £10,000 Small Business Grant were as follows:

- 1 The Net Annual Value of the property was £15,000 or less.
- 2 The property was in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief at the scheme launch date.

3 The property was occupied at the scheme launch date.

In addition to eligibility criteria, only one grant could be paid in respect of each qualifying property.

Businesses renting space within a shared building were eligible for the grant where the space they occupied was separately valued in the Valuation List and met the qualifying criteria. Additional information was required to confirm the eligibility for the grant of businesses renting property where the landlord or owner was liable to pay the rates. A separate application process to gather that information was put in place for those businesses.

Having a lease agreements in respect of rent and rate payments was not one of the eligibility criteria. However, LPS reserved the right to obtain verification that the applicant was an occupying tenant.

In cases where more than one business occupied a property, only one grant could be paid to the named ratepayer on the rate account. Businesses occupying a shared building valued as a single property entry on the Valuation List, could not meet the eligibility criteria.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Finance how much his Department has spent facilitating staff working from home.
(AQW 7046/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance provides common IT systems and services to over 25,000 staff in NICS departments, agencies and to over 40 arm's-length bodies.

The primary expenditure made by the department to facilitate staff working from home since the start of the pandemic, when the NI Executive recommended that those who can work from home should work from home, has been almost £3.3m in providing IT equipment and licences, which is for all staff, not just the those in the Department of Finance.

These costs, for the period 1 April 2020 to 15 September 2020, are broken down below.

Equipment (laptops, headsets, Wi-Fi dongles, etc.)	£ 2,540,213
Software Licences	£ 682,235
Increasing internet bandwidth	£ 50,000
Total	£ 3,272,448

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance how his Department is working with HM Treasury to ensure that Northern Ireland receives sufficient funding and resourcing for the Office for Environmental Protection when it becomes operational in January 2021.

(AQW 7066/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is currently developing a business case to determine the overall costs of the Office for Environmental Protection. I understand that a ring-fenced budget will be provided by Treasury for the OEP.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance for an update on plans for next year's census.

(AQW 7172/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The legislation for the 2021 Census (Order and Regulations) was approved by the Executive and by the Assembly in July.

The 2021 census will be a digital-first census with the public being encouraged to fill out their census form online. A full census rehearsal was successfully held last Autumn and, as set out in the recent census legislation, officials continue to work to deliver the census next March. In doing so we will continue to be guided by the latest evidence and advice both from within government and public health experts.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance what work his Department has carried out, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, to determine where ethnic monitoring should be introduced.

(AQW 7216/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The question on which policies should be subject to ethnic monitoring is a decision for individual departments. NISRA works closely with the Equality Commission and recently published the joint guide to using Section 75 data in policy making for the wider public sector: <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/Public%20Authorities/S75DataSignpostingGuide.pdf?ext=.pdf>

NISRA collects and analyses sub-population data by various geographies and by Section 75 groups, including racial groups.

Data sources are either statistical surveys or operational administrative systems. Surveys are designed by statisticians and, as standard, contain core questions on demographic classifications including Section 75 groups such as ethnicity.

NISRA surveys are a rich source of information for analysis by various ethnic groups, particularly when the samples sizes are larger. The 2021 Census will of course provide a very rich seam for this purpose.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance to detail the money returned to HM Treasury, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 7227/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I can confirm that there were no departmental underspends between 2014-15 and 2018-19 in non ring-fenced Resource DEL or Capital DEL returned to HM Treasury. All departmental underspends in these areas have been accessed in the following year through the Budget Exchange Scheme.

Ring-fenced Resource DEL funding can only be used for the non-cash costs of depreciation and certain types of impairment. As this funding cannot be used for other purposes the amount unused at the year-end has not been accessed through the Budget Exchange Scheme. The amounts for 2014-15 to 2018-19 are shown in table one below.

64% of the total underspend (£388.6m) is in relation to Student Loan Impairments which is difficult to forecast in the timeframe required by HM Treasury. Forecasting is difficult due to the timing of statistical information being made available from the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR). These statistics inform the calculation of the student loan impairment forecast, the timing of the release of these statistics increases the uncertainty in the possible change in economic determinants which in turn impacts on the quality and accuracy of the forecast.

Due to the fact that there is an extremely high risk with the forecasts, HM Treasury have agreed for a contingency to be built in. Should the contingency not be required this will add to the level of underspend reported. We understand that this approach is consistent with that taken elsewhere.

Other ring-fenced underspends relate primarily to lower than anticipated depreciation cost for departments arising for example from assets coming into use later than was originally forecast or changes in Land and Property Service (LPS) indices used for the calculation of depreciation.

Unfortunately a significant amount of Financial Transactions Capital funding has been returned. This represents unused funding as opposed to departmental underspends. The amounts for 2014-15 to 2018-19 are shown in table one below.

As previously stated, I am keen to ensure a significant uptake in the use of Financial Transactions Capital. My officials are liaising with the Strategic Investment Board to examine the issues and I have asked that they also engage with other departments to identify additional ways in which this funding can be used.

Table one

£million	Ring-Fenced Resource DEL	FTC Capital
2018-19	83.0	171.9
2017-18	100.7	109.4
2016-17	96.5	34.5
2015-16	292.2	-
2014-15	29.9	-
Total	602.2	315.8

Totals may not add due to roundings

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Finance how many people have died prematurely as a result of air pollution over the last ten years; and how this compares to neighbouring jurisdictions.
(AQW 7291/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Deaths are registered with the General Register Office and are classified using the International Classification of Diseases (ICD10). The ICD10 codes relating to air Pollution are 'Z58.1' and 'Z57.3'.

Since 2010, there have been no deaths registered that contain these codes. As an additional check, a keyword search was carried out on the cause of death text fields. The term 'air pollution' yielded no results. Assessing the association of air pollution in relation to mortality would require an in-depth research study. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) is currently scoping out a research proposal to undertake this research using the Northern Ireland Mortality Study (NIMS).

For information, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) recently published the results of a study looking at the link between exposure to air pollution and the increased risk of dying from Covid-19. Also, a 'Data Insights' document produced by the Administrative Data Research Centre Northern Ireland titled 'the effect of exposure to air pollution on health and mortality' was published in April 2020.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/doesexposuretoairpollutionincreasetheriskofdyingfromthecoronaviruscovid19/2020-08-13>

https://www.adruk.org/fileadmin/uploads/adruk/Documents/The_effect_of_exposure_to_air_pollution_on_health_and_mortality.pdf

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Finance what support is available to Civil Service staff who are experiencing difficulties with alcohol or drugs.

(AQW 7303/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Civil Service provides a wide range of support to help colleagues experiencing difficulties with alcohol or drugs. The services are co-ordinated and managed through NICSHR.

The services include:

- a The Welfare Support Service which provides an independent and confidential service to all NICS colleagues. When a colleague contacts Welfare Support they are allocated to a specific Welfare Officer who will provide support throughout the process of getting the appropriate help and assistance. Civil Service Welfare Officers are well positioned to provide details of external organisations specialising in providing treatment and support for alcohol and drug issues. These organisations include Addiction NI, Alcoholics Anonymous, Cuan Mhuire, Newry, Ascertainment and Threshold – Drug Outreach Services.
- b The external provider Inspire Workplaces provides Civil Service colleagues with a comprehensive Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). This service, which complements our own internal Welfare Service, is available to all Civil Servants, and provides colleagues with a gateway to a wide range of confidential and support functions. These include counselling and information advisory services on alcohol and drug addiction. Colleagues can access the service through a confidential helpline which is available 24/7 365 days per year.
- c The WELL programme managed and delivered by the Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association (NICSSA) provides staff with support, education and information on a wide range of health and wellbeing issues including advice on healthy relationships with alcohol. Health promotion advice is available to all Civil Service colleagues and their families through their interactive Health and Wellbeing Support Hub.
- d The Civil Service Alcohol, Drugs and Substance Abuse policy provides a framework which promotes the health and wellbeing of all staff, and awareness of the effects of excessive drinking and illegal drugs can have. Importantly the policy provides key guidance, procedures and assistance to staff and their managers on how to obtain help and support, and how these issues should be managed in the workplace.

Fundamental to this policy and all of the above support provided to Civil Service colleagues is the role of the NICS Occupational Health Service (OHS). OHS works closely with colleagues in Employee Relations in NICSHR providing professional, appropriate and timely occupational health advice to support individuals and departments in managing these situations. OHS also seeks to bring all our wellbeing partners together to ensure a joined up collaborative approach is taken when tackling this important issue.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Finance what engagement he has had with local banks regarding fraud and money laundering as a result of the information found in the FinCEN files.

(AQW 7304/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The regulation of financial services is a reserved matter. This is the responsibility of the British Government and its regulatory authorities, in particular the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) as the conduct regulator for the banking sector.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance, pending the outcome of the Public Service Pensions Consultation and subsequent policy decisions, to detail the extent to which his Department will be able to develop remedies that diverge from any future approach taken by HM Treasury; and how any Northern Ireland specific remedies would be funded.

(AQW 7317/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Public Service Pensions are devolved under the Public Service Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2014. However, given the analogous nature of provision between public service pension scheme design here and in Britain a conjoined policy response to legal challenge against similar schemes is often appropriate. Following the close of consultation I will bring a paper with firm policy proposals for consideration by the Executive.

The options presented in the consultation document have already been developed with input from the devolved public service schemes, to deliver a core remedy solution which meets the requirements of the McCloud ruling for all those schemes affected.

The cost of the remedy in each scheme will be addressed as part of its scheme valuation and cost control process. Within this process costs are shared between scheme members and employers. My department will set out in directions the technical detail of how remedy costs should be taken into account. We will consider how best to take forward the cost control outcomes for each scheme once the details of these are known.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance how much revenue has been generated from searches by the General Register Office Northern Ireland for each of the last three years.

(AQW 7342/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The General Register Office has responsibility for the Genealogy Northern Ireland website which provides online access to historical life event records. Credits are purchased by customers which can be used to access records on the website.

A customer can register on the website and purchase one credit at a cost of 50 pence which will enable them to carry out basic index searches free of charge. Details are provided below in relation to the revenue generated from searches on website over the last three years:

2017/18:	£260k
2018/19:	£265k
2019/20:	£240k

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance whether she has considered waiving the fees paid by people in certain age categories for searches by the General Register Office Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7344/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The GRO family history website which is available to the public 24/7, 365 days per year currently has almost 82,000 active users and it would be resource intensive to apply and monitor different levels of fees depending on the age of the user.

The fees for searches on the Genealogy Northern Ireland family history website are prescribed in The General Register Office (Fees) Order 2016. A customer can register on the website and purchase one credit at a cost of 50 pence which will enable them to carry out searches of the indexes free of charge. Further charges are only applied when more detailed information is required or they wish to view the registration record.

I am not aware of such a waiver applying in other jurisdictions.

For the above reasons I do not intend to introduce an age-based waiver.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the oversight of Land Property Services.

(AQW 7354/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services (LPS) is a division of the Department and as such it is subject to the same model of oversight and governance as the Department as a whole.

The Chief Executive of LPS reports to the Permanent Secretary. At the beginning of the financial year, the Permanent Secretary delegates responsibility to the Chief Executive for the management of LPS' budget. The Permanent Secretary Chairs the Departmental Board, which provides collective leadership, strategic direction and has responsibility for operational delivery of the functions of the Department. The Chief Executive of LPS is a member of the Departmental Board which includes three non-executive members. The Departmental Board receives monthly reports on budgetary and financial matters and quarterly reports on the risk register and delivery of key departmental priorities. Information on the activities of LPS feature in these reports.

The Department's internal audit unit conducts a programme of work in LPS each year which deliver opinions on the systems of internal control in operation in the Division. The reports by internal audit to senior managers provide an objective and independent assessment of the systems of internal control in operation in LPS, together with prioritised recommendations to strengthen controls and implement further improvements. A synopsis of the main findings from each audit is provided to the Departmental Audit and Risk Committee and all audit reports issued as final in the past 3 years provided a satisfactory audit opinion.

In the past financial year, internal audit completed audits of the Rate Rebate Central Unit, Domestic and Non Domestic Valuations, Land Registration Fees and Intake, Rate Collection and Recovery in the LPS Craigavon and Belfast offices and Post Opening Procedures in Lanyon Plaza. In the current financial year, the plan includes reviews of the Land Registry Casework Support Team, the Land Registry Legal Team, LPS Digital Services and the Revenue and Benefits rate collection system. Internal Audit also provide advice and guidance to LPS business areas when requested.

The work of LPS is also subject to review by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO). LPS' running costs are scrutinised as part of the Department of Finance Resource Accounts. In addition, the NIAO undertakes an annual audit of rating revenue in the Rate Levy Accruals Account (also referred to as the LPS Trust Statement). This audit results in a Report to Those Charged with Governance, which includes the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Audit Certificate and a listing of recommendations. The NIAO may also decide to undertake Value for Money reviews on aspects of LPS' work.

The Departmental Audit and Risk Committee (DARC) supports the Accounting Officer and the Departmental Board on issues of risk, control and governance. In addition, DARC provides assurances and advice to the Accounting Officer on the adequacy of audit coverage both internal and external. The DARC is chaired by one of the Non-Executive Board Members. During 2019-20, the DARC undertook six 'deep dive' examinations of key risk areas across the Department. One of those deep dive examinations concentrated on fraud in LPS. In addition, in the course of its regular meetings the DARC considers:

- Progress against internal audit plans;
- Progress on the implementation of internal audit recommendations;

- Stewardship Statements provided by the Chief Executive of LPS;
- Reports to Those Charged with Governance and Value for Money reports provided by NI Audit Office; and
- Fraud and Raising Concerns (whistleblowing).

All meetings of the DARC are attended by representatives from the NIAO and internal audit. The Chair of the Committee holds independent meetings separately with the NIAO and Head of Internal Audit to discuss any particular issues of concern.

Finally, LPS has systems and processes in place, designed to support data protection, information management, and physical, IT and cyber security, including the establishment of an Information Management Unit and the appointment of network of Information Asset Owners.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the current forecast variance between Estimated Penny Product and Actual Penny Product for 2020/21 for each district Council area.[R]
(AQW 7392/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The table below shows the forecast 2020/21 rate revenue for each District Council based on rating data as at 31st August 2020, the rate revenue paid based on the estimated process and the difference (ie the finalisation). Where the forecast rate revenue is higher than the estimate, a positive finalisation is forecast; similarly, where the estimate is higher than the forecast rate revenue raised, a negative finalisation is forecast.

The forecast rate revenue figures are subject to change throughout the remainder of the 2020/21 rating year as gross income from rate assessments and the various rating losses move, and as such the finalisation can change in a positive or negative way. Land & Property Services officials monitor the figures and provide monthly updates to Council Finance Officers, together with a suite of management information to assist them with their budgetary planning process.

District council	Forecast Rate Revenue (£)	Rate Revenue Paid based on EPP (£)	Finalisation (£)
Antrim & Newtownabbey	49,362,274	48,813,291	548,983
Ards and North Down	52,202,956	51,972,826	230,130
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	68,017,912	67,010,379	1,007,533
Belfast	161,798,309	162,028,158	(229,849)
Causeway Coast & Glens	47,639,042	46,890,320	748,722
Derry & Strabane	58,128,349	57,847,334	281,015
Fermanagh & Omagh	36,489,642	36,097,855	391,787
Lisburn & Castlereagh	48,708,366	48,682,118	26,248
Mid & East Antrim	49,766,791	49,721,379	45,412
Mid Ulster	38,538,341	37,514,591	1,023,750
Newry Mourne & Down	56,986,289	56,346,735	639,554
Total	667,639,377	662, 924,986	4,714,391

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance why he has not released the funding for the commitment in New Decade, New Approach for an additional 600 PSNI officers.
(AQW 7407/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) Document was produced by the British and Irish Governments. It outlines a number of priorities to be considered by the Executive, however, departments identified the costs of delivering the full range of priorities set out in the NDNA, to be far in excess of the funding package provided.

The Executive agreed the 2020-21 Budget which allocated funding available in line with local needs and priorities.

I met with the Justice Minister prior to setting the Budget 2020-21 and at that point the PSNI's proposals to increase police numbers were still under development. The Department of Justice has subsequently submitted a Strategic Outline Case (SOC) seeking DoF approval for the PSNI to proceed to Outline Business Case stage for an additional 600 officers at a cost of £40 million per annum. This SOC has been reviewed by DoF and is currently with DoJ for further consideration. Subject to the outcome of the appraisal process it will be for DoJ to bid for any additional funding. The Executive will consider this in light of the funding available.

I have, and continue, to press the British Government to provide adequate funding to take forward the NDNA priorities.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Finance whether he has received a bid for financial support from the Minister for Infrastructure for taxi and coach operators.

(AQW 7419/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Yes, one bid has been received from the Minister for Infrastructure for support for taxi and coach operators. This bid was for £1.4m to cover the cost of waiving the cost of licence fees. The Executive agreed this allocation, which I announced on 13 August 2020.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance how many premature deaths have occurred in Northern Ireland due to ammonia pollution, for each year since 2010.

(AQW 7474/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NISRA collates data on registrations of death. Cause of death information is currently available for registrations up to 30 June 2020. Between 1 January 2010 and 30 June 2020, there have been no deaths registered due to ammonia pollution. It should be noted that deaths due to ammonia pollution are difficult to quantify as no International Classification of Diseases (ICD10) code exists for this cause of death. To answer this question, the NISRA deaths database was searched for the keyword 'ammonia' and also for the presence of ICD10 codes relating to poisoning by gases, fumes and vapours.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance what measures have been taken to allocate the £33 million support package for arts and culture.

(AQW 7529/17-22)

Mr Murphy: At the Executive meeting on 24th September 2020, the Executive agreed to allocate £29 million to DfC for cultural recovery. Given that the Executive previously allocated £4 million for the Cultural Resilience Fund, it means that an additional £33 million has been allocated to the sector.

While it is for the executive to determine how funding received through the Barnett formula is used, in this instance the funding provided is equivalent to the full £33 million Barnett consequential.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Finance when Dormant Funds will be available to applicants; and how such applications will be made.

(AQW 7553/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I intend to lay a Strategic Plan setting out the purpose of the Fund in the Assembly very shortly. This is a requirement under the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Act 2008. Once this Plan is in place the National Lottery Community Fund (NCLF) will proceed to open the Fund and set out how applications can be made.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether the UK Government's commitment to providing up to £27.3 million per week under COVID-19 Bus Service Support Grant Restart scheme until it is no longer needed has been reflected in Barnett consequentials thus far.[R]

(AQW 7572/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Guarantee announced on 24 July 2020 provided a minimum of £2.2 billion for the Executive's COVID-19 response. This has meant that Barnett has not been applied in the usual way and therefore it has not been possible to determine whether individual English measures attract a Barnett consequential.

Work is ongoing with Treasury, to determine how funding under the Guarantee compares with what would have been provided via Barnett consequentials, however that work has not yet concluded.

It is important to note that Barnett consequentials are unhypothecated, meaning it is for the Executive to decide how to allocate the funding in line with local needs and priorities.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 6851/17-22, to provide a breakdown of the causes of the 4,673 deaths referred to in part (v) of the answer.

(AQW 7627/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The statistics in Table 4a of the Registrar General Quarterly Tables 2020 for Quarter 1 and 2 of 2020 (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/registrar-general-quarterly-tables-2020>) provide the breakdown requested.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the purpose of funding assigned as one pot of £55.2 million announced in his Written Ministerial Statement of 24 September 2020; and (ii) whether this includes support for Translink, private coach operators, taxis, hauliers, sole traders and private businesses generally.[R]

(AQW 7663/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The £55.2 million is being held centrally for further sectoral support and unforeseen PPE costs. Decisions on how this funding is allocated are a matter for the Executive.

Department of Health

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health for a provisional date for the reopening of Bangor Minor Injuries Unit.
(AQW 6368/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): While the South Eastern Trust advises that it is not possible to give a definitive date for the re-opening of Bangor Minor Injuries Unit at this time, it anticipates that the service will be reinstated at the start of November 2020.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health whether the investigation into the COVID-19 outbreak at Craigavon Area Hospital will include a review of the fit testing of masks provided to the staff at the hospital.
(AQW 6557/17-22)

Mr Swann: The recently appointed independent Chair of the Serious Adverse Incident (SAI) investigation will develop terms of reference in consultation with the Southern Health and Social Care Trust affected families. This investigation will be undertaken in line with the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) SAI protocol, and should therefore consider all relevant potential contributory issues and it is expected that this would include the proper use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking to direct the Health and Social Care Board to implement the Refractory Epilepsy Specialist Clinical Advisory Service's recent recommendation on the supply of medical cannabis.
(AQW 6558/17-22)

Mr Swann: Clinical responsibility for the care of any patient discussed at RESCAS remains with the referring paediatric neurology team in the Trust concerned. The implementation of any recommendations made by RESCAS is a clinical issue. There is no role for me as Minister or for any politician in clinical decisions relating to individual patients.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Refractory Epilepsy Specialist Clinical Advisory Service.
(AQW 6591/17-22)

Mr Swann: The national Refractory Epilepsy Specialist Clinical Advisory Service (RESCAS) was launched earlier this year to provide a forum for the discussion of difficult epilepsy cases that have presented diagnostic and/or management difficulties.

RESCAS is an advisory service aimed at complementing regional clinical services. Further information regarding RESCAS is available on the Department's website at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/refractory-epilepsy-specialist-clinical-advisory-service-rescas>.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to review who would be eligible to receive COVID-19 testing through the Pillar 1 programme.
(AQW 6607/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department's Expert Advisory Group on Testing (EAGT) continues to meet regularly to consider the emerging medical and scientific evidence and developments relating to testing at local, national and international level, and accordingly to consider further expansion of our testing programme; the priority groups eligible for testing and the most appropriate settings for those groups to be tested.

Optimising available testing capacity across both Pillars of our testing programme will continue to be a key priority for me and for my officials in the weeks and months ahead.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the financial and other support provided to optometrists to provide eyecare during the response related to COVID-19; (ii) how many patients have been able to access NI PEARS in the previous six months, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area; and (iii) whether he has any plans to provide additional support for local enhanced services to address waiting lists.
(AQW 6667/17-22)

Mr Swann: In response to the reduction in the level of activity that Ophthalmic Practitioners were able to undertake due to Covid-19, a Financial Support Scheme (FSS) was established to reduce the risk to the ongoing viability of the service. The FSS provided an additional payment to eligible ophthalmic practices each month based on the average monthly payments received in 2019-20. Approximately £6.5 million in FSS payments have been made to Ophthalmic Contractors since April 2020.

While restrictions on routine eye care were eased on 29 June 2020, for the remainder of 2020-21 there remains considerable uncertainty in terms of the level of General Ophthalmic Services (GOS) activity that Ophthalmic Practitioners will be able to undertake. In response the Department has committed to further financial support each month with any significant budget underspend recycled back to Ophthalmic Contractors in the form of additional payments. This will ensure that the level of payments to Ophthalmic Practitioners during 2020-21 is in line with normal levels, even if activity is significantly reduced due to Covid-19.

In addition to the FSS, £367,000 of Level 1 & Level 2 PPE has been provided from central Health and Social Care stocks for Ophthalmic Practitioners since April 2020.

Table 1 shows the number of patients who accessed NI PEARS in each Health and Social Care Trust between February and July 2020.

Table 1

Trust	Number of Patients
Belfast	1,228
Northern	1,379
South Eastern	1,138
Southern	1,361
Western	935

NI PEARS was suspended from April to June 2020, with Urgent Eyecare replacing it. This was to facilitate virtual (non-face-to-face) activity which was not an available option in the original NI PEARS Service Specification. 7,781 patients accessed Urgent Eyecare in this time with 50% being seen virtually. Table 2 shows the number who accessed NI PEARS and Urgent Eyecare each month between February and July 2020.

Table 2

Month	NI PEARS	Urgent Eyecare
Feb-20	1,852	-
Mar-20	1,566	73
Apr-20	104	2,165
May-20	5	2,610
Jun-20	216	3,006
Jul-20	2,298	179

Health and Social Care has now re-opened all existing enhanced service provision in the acute eye and glaucoma pathways. Additional enhanced services are planned for post-operative cataract reviews (in-year) and potential macular and neurology enhanced services (in development). All enhanced services are designed to free capacity in secondary care and address waiting lists.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to streamline access to ophthalmic and other services away from application of an HC1 form, which can take up to eight weeks to process, for those in receipt of Universal Credit. (AQW 6668/17-22)

Mr Swann: Entitlement to assistance with health costs is generally based on low income or on receipt of some social security benefits set out in legislation (The Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004). At present this does not include Universal Credit.

It is necessary to make amendments to the legislation to include Universal Credit recipients with incomes below specified thresholds. It had not been possible to make the required changes to the legislation due to the absence of the NI Assembly in the first instance and then the ongoing need to respond to Covid-19.

An interim measure has been to use the existing Low Income Scheme (LIS) administered by the Department for Communities. This scheme provides a safety net for patients who do not automatically receive full help with the cost of their healthcare, but who have a low income and who therefore face difficulty meeting the cost of their health service treatment. The LIS involves an extra administrative burden for patients in the completion of an HC1 form, but one that cannot be avoided in the absence of regulatory change.

As soon as capacity permits officials will assess the options for a longer term solution. This will need to balance providing an equivalent level of coverage to that which existed prior to the introduction of Universal Credit, with minimising the impact on the budget or adding a significant administrative burden on either the individual or the processing agency

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to outline the current status of the Autism Strategy (2013-2020). (AQW 6682/17-22)

Mr Swann: Two progress reports have been published and the latest was laid in the Assembly on 27 February 2020. Each demonstrate the significant progress which has been achieved in supporting autistic people, families and carers. Work is

underway to review the current strategy to inform the development of a revised Autism Strategy. Whilst preparations had been at an advanced stage, this work has been delayed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether all actions set out in the Autism Strategy Action Plan (2013 – 2016) were delivered by the Executive.

(AQW 6683/17-22)

Mr Swann: Two progress reports have been published and the latest was laid in the Assembly on 27 February 2020. Each demonstrate the significant progress which has been achieved in supporting autistic people, families and carers. Work is underway to review the current strategy to inform the development of a revised Autism Strategy. Whilst preparations had been at an advanced stage, this work has been delayed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the Autism Strategy (2013-2020); and whether it should be reviewed.

(AQW 6684/17-22)

Mr Swann: Two progress reports have been published and the latest was laid in the Assembly on 27 February 2020. Each demonstrate the significant progress which has been achieved in supporting autistic people, families and carers. Work is underway to review the current strategy to inform the development of a revised Autism Strategy. Whilst preparations had been at an advanced stage, this work has been delayed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health, in relation to the Autism Strategy (2013-2020), whether he will bring a progress report on the 34 cross-departmental actions to the Assembly.

(AQW 6685/17-22)

Mr Swann: Two progress reports have been published and the latest was laid in the Assembly on 27 February 2020. Each demonstrate the significant progress which has been achieved in supporting autistic people, families and carers. Work is underway to review the current strategy to inform the development of a revised Autism Strategy. Whilst preparations had been at an advanced stage, this work has been delayed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health whether patient blood groups are routinely held on file at GP surgeries.

(AQW 6714/17-22)

Mr Swann: GPs do not check a patient's blood group as a matter of course, therefore do not routinely hold this information in their records.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Health what vulnerable groups will be entitled to the influenza vaccination this year.

(AQW 6751/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has published information on the groups eligible for free-of-charge flu vaccination under the 2020/21 public seasonal influenza vaccination programme. This information is published on nidirect and on the Department of Health website. It is available at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/flu-vaccine-adults>

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/flu-vaccination-programme-be-expanded>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on plans for the future of Castlederg fire station.

(AQW 6752/17-22)

Mr Swann: An update has been provided in the response to AQW 6420/17-22.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health, other than GP surgeries, what options patients identified in priority groups will have to access Health Service influenza vaccinations.

(AQW 6782/17-22)

Mr Swann: The vaccine will be available in schools to all primary school pupils and children in year 8 of secondary school.

It will also be available through health and social care trust vaccination schemes for health and social care staff. Furthermore, arrangements are being put in place to ensure that health care staff working in the independent sector will have improved access to flu vaccines and a large number of community pharmacies will also offer the health service flu vaccinations for staff in both the statutory and independent care sectors.

The GP led programme covers pre-school children, those aged 65 and over, household contacts of those who shielded during Covid-19 and those in clinical at risk groups. Where it is necessary to have vaccination clinics in non-clinical community settings, GP practices will make this decision taking into consideration social distancing and infection control requirements.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether Health and Social Care workers have been surveyed on their preferred personal protective equipment (PPE); and what measures are being taken to ensure that the most effective pieces of PPE equipment are readily available in a second wave scenario.

(AQW 6813/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency launched a survey on 4 September 2020, under the auspices of the 10000 More Voices Initiative, seeking views of health and social care staff on their experiences of PPE during the first wave of the covid-19 pandemic. This survey is open for one month and responses will be analysed to better understand and where possible improve the experiences of frontline staff.

A Product Review Protocol is in operation to ensure all stock items are deemed suitable and appropriate for use in the Health and Social Care setting. BSO is working towards a 12 week stock in hand position for all PPE items, based on modelling projected demands, in preparation for a second wave as well as for winter and rebuild service's needs.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what work has been undertaken to implement the Refractory Epilepsy Service Specialist Clinical Advice Service recommendation of a shared-care plan for Billy Caldwell; and when this work began.

(AQW 6847/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not appropriate that I comment or discuss the treatment being provided to any individual patient, or intervene in any way with regard to the clinical decision-making process.

The clinical responsibility for the care of any patient who is referred to or discussed at RESCAS, remains with the referring paediatric neurology team including responsibility for the implementation of any treatment advice made.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the engagements he has had with the British Medical Association and other stakeholders around securing additional support that would allow drive through flu vaccines to be administered.

(AQW 7143/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department has engaged with the British Medical Association (BMA) through its General Practitioners Committee. The BMA has also engaged with the Health and Social Care Board in the latter's role as the contract holder with GP practices.

Additional funding will be allocated to GPs to assist with their delivery of an expanded flu vaccination programme this year. It is up to each individual GP practice as to when and how they arrange their flu clinics.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health whether the COVID-19 home test kits are dispatched from (i) GB; or (ii) Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7162/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Home Testing kits are distributed via the National Testing Initiative managed by the Department of Health and Social Care, London and are distributed direct from GB.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for an update on his work with the Minister of Education on the allocation of the £1.5 million of funding for mental health in schools.

(AQW 7248/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has been working closely with the Department of Education (DE) in the development of the Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework.

The Framework is due to be finalised by December 2020 and will be supported by a number of key interventions spanning health and education. In recognition of the importance of this work, I have agreed to provide DE with £1.5 million recurrently from 2021/22 onwards and this will be used to prioritise interventions that will improve the mental health of our children and young people in schools.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the timeline and dates for the completion of a new substance misuse strategy.

(AQW 7251/17-22)

Mr Swann: As reflected in "New Decade, New Approach", my Department is leading on the development of a new substance use strategy. Work to co-produce this new strategy is well underway and, subject to the demands placed on my Department by COVID-19, I plan to publish this document for formal public consultation this Autumn.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the role and membership of the Mental Health Strategic Reform Board.

(AQW 7402/17-22)

Mr Swann: The purpose of the Mental Health Strategic Reform Board is to provide strategic oversight, direction and governance for the development of the Mental Health Strategy and implementation of the Mental Health Action Plan. The group will focus on overseeing progress against key milestones but will not hold detailed implementation or policy discussions. If required, the Board will expedite decision making should implementation issues require escalation.

The Reform Board has the following members:

- Sean Holland, Chief Social Worker, Department of Health
- Relevant Directors in the Department of Health
- The Mental Health Champion
- Representative from the Public Health Agency
- Representatives from the Health and Social Care Board
- Representative from the Patient and Client Council
- HSC Trust Mental Health Directors
- HSC Trust Mental Health Service User Consultants
- Carer's representative
- Representative from the Bamford Monitoring Group
- Representative from the Community and Voluntary Sector
- Department of Health Professional Officers

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health to detail the current occupancy of intensive care units and paediatric intensive care units in each hospital setting.

(AQW 7414/17-22)

Mr Swann: Table 1 to follow outlines the number of patients occupying beds in intensive care units as at 24th September 2020.

Table 1: Number of patients in ICU

Hospital Site	Number of Patients
Altnagelvin	6
Antrim	4
BCH	2
Causeway	2
Craigavon	5
Mater	2
RVH	25
SWAH	4
Ulster	7
Cardiac ICU	10
Paediatric ICU	9
Total Patients in ICU	76

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people diagnosed with cancer each month in (i) 2018; (ii) 2019; and (iii) 2020, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 7458/17-22)

Mr Swann: Full registration of all cancer patients in Northern Ireland (NI) is currently only available from the NI Cancer Registry (NICR) up to the end of 2018.

- (i) Information on the number of people diagnosed with cancer in each month for the year 2018 is provided in Table 1 overleaf.

Table 1: Number of cases of cancer (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer) diagnosed in NI during 2018 by month of diagnosis and Health and Social Care Trust of residence.

Month of diagnosis	Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT)					
	Belfast HSCT	Northern HSCT	South-Eastern HSCT	Southern HSCT	Western HSCT	Northern Ireland
Jan	148	218	149	166	127	808

Month of diagnosis	Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT)					
	Belfast HSCT	Northern HSCT	South-Eastern HSCT	Southern HSCT	Western HSCT	Northern Ireland
Feb	130	165	156	136	116	703
Mar	202	220	151	157	117	847
Apr	142	231	163	147	108	791
May	203	247	189	152	133	924
Jun	152	248	169	146	128	843
Jul	160	217	139	163	126	805
Aug	192	248	169	132	142	883
Sep	141	243	163	139	120	806
Oct	153	248	187	181	158	927
Nov	179	219	148	146	142	834
Dec	151	178	165	121	110	725

Source: Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR)

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail what considerations are given to community needs such as (i) schools; (ii) roads; and (iii) sewerage infrastructure when consideration is given to major housing developments.

(AQW 6724/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The planning system overall allows for the consideration of community needs, such as housing requirements, employment needs, facilities and services, and infrastructure, in exercise of both plan-making and development management functions.

Councils are currently bringing forward LDPs which will include a growth strategy, proposals, policies, zonings, associated criteria and key site requirements for their areas. In doing so councils must take account of the Department's Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) and the advice of consultees to the planning process in relation to roads, schools, water infrastructure and other community facilities, services and infrastructure. Councils must also take account of their Community Plan when preparing a LDP. Working with other partners, councils, therefore, have the opportunity to develop and deliver a positive and proactive approach to planning and a coherent long-term framework to guide and influence the future development of their area for the next 15 years. My Department will support this aspiration, through continued engagement with councils directly through our development plan oversight functions.

In terms of development management, all planning applications for major housing developments are considered on their merits, taking into account the LDP; regional planning policy (including the SPPS, PPS12: Housing in Settlements and PPS7: Quality Residential Environments); local circumstances and characteristics; and, all other material considerations. This includes responses from consultees covering issues such as schools, roads and sewerage infrastructure. Developer contributions may be secured on a site-specific basis through a planning agreement where necessary to overcome a barrier to the grant of permission e.g. provision of infrastructure as an element of the development or a financial sum. Ultimately, the interpretation, relevance and weight to be attached to planning policy and all other material considerations, is a matter of planning judgement for the planning authority.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she would consider the provision of bus services to and from Tullycarnet on a Sunday.

(AQW 6785/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that, from Sunday 4 October 2020, Translink will operate two Sunday return journeys on Ulsterbus/Urby service 511 which will operate along the Kings Road, Tullycarnet. City bound services will pass Dundonald Ice Bowl at 07:13 and 12:43 with return services departing from the Europa Bus Centre at 11:45 and 17:15.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the average length of time to action a repair request for (i) street lighting; and (ii) potholes, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 6819/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not maintain records by constituency.

Article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 places a duty on my Department to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. We fulfil this duty by complying with a set of Maintenance Standards for Safety. These standards are designed to ensure a consistent service level across the network and safe highways for all road users.

Our current standards specify a range of response times for the repair of road defects, depending on factors such as their severity and the volume of traffic on the road. They range from one calendar day for the most serious defects, to periods of five working days and four weeks for less serious defects. The least serious defects are usually repaired as part of the next work programme for that route. If it becomes apparent that the stipulated response time cannot be met, then my Department has the option of installing signs to warn road users of a possible danger.

For street lighting repairs, we also have a range of response times: 1 hour for emergencies; 24 hours for urgent repairs (normally group outages); and five working days for normal outage repairs.

I can assure the Member that following the allocation of funding I received for this year, I have directed officials to work to carry our repairs to our roads and street lights as quickly as possible. I am also pleased to be able to confirm that I have allocated funding to allow my Department to provide a full street lighting maintenance programme for the current financial year.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many Penalty Charge Notices for parking have been issued in (i) Magherafelt; (ii) Maghera; (iii) Cookstown, and (iv) Coalisland, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 6821/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below contains information on the number of Penalty Control Notices (PCNs) issued in Magherafelt, Maghera and Cookstown in each of the last three years – no PCNs were issued in Coalisland during this period:

Financial Year	Magherafelt	Maghera	Cookstown
2017/18	2445	52	1061
2018/19	2581	25	1178
2019/20	3217	27	1541

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of the apparent spread in ragwort this year; and (ii) how her Department will address this.
(AQW 6843/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 requires the destruction of Thistle, Dock, Ragwort and Wild Oat. My Department, as a responsible land owner, will treat areas for which it has maintenance responsibilities that have been identified as having noxious weeds present. However, my officials advise that they are not aware of any increase in the spread of Ragwort this year.

It is my Department's policy that noxious weeds growing within the road boundary are controlled before flowering by either spot cutting, pulling or cutting by mower. This is normally carried out twice per year to prevent seed production and dispersal in order to minimise the spread of the weeds on the road verges and onto adjoining lands. Persistent or new weeds are usually identified or highlighted through routine safety inspections, or by the public or their representatives via the complaints process.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a slight delay in the commencement of my Department's grass cutting and weed control programme for this year. However, I can confirm that the first treatment has already been completed and the second treatment has now commenced and subject to favourable weather conditions, is due to be completed within the next month.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will add specific targets to the Bicycle Strategy.
(AQW 6844/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Bicycle Strategy that the Member refers to was published by one of my predecessors in August 2015. There were no specific targets set out in the strategy but a number of Ministerial ambitions related to significantly increasing the proportion of shorter journeys made by bicycle.

This ambition to increase cycling journeys is reflected in the Programme for Government and my commitment to increase the proportion of journeys made by walking, cycling and public transport. As part of the 'Bike Life' project – in which the Department participates on behalf of Belfast – Sustrans published a report in January 2019 setting out ambitions for cycling levels in 2040 for each of the participating cities. Officials were involved in contributing to that document and the ambition published in it for Belfast is broadly similar to what was published in the Bicycle Strategy. The document can be viewed at this link: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/2940/2940.pdf>.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will be carrying out a traffic survey at Crescent Link Retail Park, Londonderry, to assess the need for a pedestrian crossing in the area.
(AQW 6893/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following receipt of a number of requests, my Department has programmed traffic surveys to inform an assessment for provision of a controlled pedestrian crossing at this location. Once the surveys have been completed the proposal will be assessed against the current policy to determine if it meets the minimum criteria required to merit provision of a pedestrian crossing.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Infrastructure what her Department is doing to ensure all modes of public transport are dementia friendly.

(AQW 6897/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department and Translink work closely with groups such as Dementia NI and the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) to identify and address physical and non-physical barriers to public transport that some within our community may experience, including those with dementia.

This has informed the introduction of a range of measures over recent years, including training for front line staff on the Glider service; engagement on the design of new infrastructure, including the new Belfast Transport Hub, and all staff being trained to recognise the JAM card. I am committed to a public transport service that is inclusive and accessible to all.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will explore ways to safeguard jobs that may be impacted by Translink's proposed cutting of Ulsterbus tours.

(AQW 6907/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Given the impact of COVID-19 on Ulsterbus Tours, whereby there is currently no income and a tour programme for 2021 is not viable, given social distancing requirements and the future uncertainties for the Tours Market, it is Translink's position that Ulsterbus Tours should cease trading, that those staff should be placed at risk of redundancy and a consultation process for these redundancies should begin immediately. Translink is currently entering a consultation process with its Trade Union partners and following that, one to one engagement with the affected staff. As part of this process, it expects to discuss options for the business and will assess opportunities to redeploy staff.

Ulsterbus Tours sits outside the Public Service Agreement with my Department and is not funded by the Department's subsidy. As such, Translink has taken this action to avoid increased pressures on its overall cost base as a result of the financial pressures facing the public service operator.

Further pressures will only be alleviated if funding is provided to support the public transport network and these public sector jobs. I have consistently raised the need for funding of our public transport network at the Executive to safeguard jobs and ensure access to public transport particularly in our rural communities. I will continue to make representations to the Finance Minister and Executive Colleagues to ensure we continue to have a publically owned public transport network that operates on need not profit.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will address the capacity issues facing the Driver and Vehicle Agency's booking line.

(AQW 6908/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of its plan to restore services, the DVA has recently reintroduced further vehicle testing services which has significantly increased the number of customers requiring to book a test. Currently the MOT telephone booking system is the only channel available to the public for booking tests. Call volumes are almost double what they were this time last year with some customers also using the booking line to make general enquiries about DVA services, rather than using other means. Social media and other messaging is being used to help clarify the contact points that customers should use, depending on their query.

The DVA has urgently explored measures to improve this service and from 23 September introduced a new call messaging service to redirect general calls to nidirect. In addition, the call centre opening hours have been extended by an additional 2 hours from 5pm to 7pm on Monday to Wednesday. To further alleviate pressure on the MOT telephone booking system, the DVA continues to engage directly with the haulage industry, particularly those operators with large fleets, to facilitate bookings at a local test centre level where possible rather than using the booking phone line.

The DVA is also planning to reinstate its online booking service with a phased implementation from 1 October as set out in the table below.

Date	Service
1 October	Vehicle tests for HGVs and trailers only
5 October	Practical driving tests for all new customers
12 October	Vehicle tests for all other categories

This should significantly reduce the demand on the MOT telephone booking system.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of street light outages; and (ii) the budgetary requirement to repair them, broken down by constituency, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 6909/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is unable to provide this information by constituency however details of the total number of street lighting outages and the associated costs for the last three years are shown in the table below. Please note it is not possible to separate the cost of outage repairs only and while the majority of expenditure is associated with lamp replacement, the figures shown are the costs for all street lighting maintenance activities carried out by external contractors and my Department's internal workforce:

Financial Year	No. of Outages Repaired	Budget
2019-2020	38,628	£4,172k
2018-2019	42,166	£4,304k
2017-2018	43,719	£4,520k

Following an initial delay in April, due to the COVID19 crisis, my Department is now providing a full street lighting maintenance service, with outages generally being attended to within the required 5 working days.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure why it is not possible to check the MOT history online for vehicles tested in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6924/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is not possible to check the MOT history online for vehicles tested in Northern Ireland as the current system does not include the required functionality.

The DVA is developing a new MOT booking system and the provision to check a vehicle's MOT history online will be considered as part of the future requirements for the new system.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many driving test examiners are employed full time at Enniskillen Driving Test Centre.

(AQW 6928/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The DVA has a number of dual role vehicle examiners who in addition to conducting vehicle tests are trained to conduct driving tests. There are currently three dual role examiners in Enniskillen, conducting both vehicle and driver tests, and one part time driver examiner who works 2 days per week. My officials will look at options to divert additional resources to this area should this be necessary.

The DVA will continue to work with staff and trade unions in the coming weeks to ensure that testing is conducted in line with public health advice and guidance to ensure the safety of all.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's efforts to prevent and mitigate against the threat of flooding in Fintona, Co Tyrone.

(AQW 6968/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is continuing to assess whether at present there are any viable flood alleviation works that can be taken forward. A financially viable scheme has not been identified at this stage, but it is anticipated that this final assessment process will be complete by the end of the year.

In the meantime my Department annually inspects and maintains a number of designated urban watercourses in the Fintona area. Additionally watercourse inlet structures that my Department has responsibility for are inspected and maintained on a weekly basis.

My Department will also continue to work with multi-agency partners, including Local Government, to provide support to local communities through the work of the Regional Community Resilience Group (RCRG). The RCRG helps local communities prepare for and respond to weather related emergencies. As part of this work 2 sand bag containers have been provided and are maintained for community use.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether remedial works will be carried out in Newcastle to alleviate the potential threat of flooding before the flood alleviation plan is put in place, to include (i) increasing the double valves on the flood defense wall on the Burren River; (ii) fixing the damaged culvert on the Shinma Road; and (iii) fixing the sewerage system which currently mixes seawater and sewage.

(AQW 6969/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At this stage, it appears the cause of the Newcastle flooding was as a result of high flows in the Shimna River and a blockage of two bridge arches by large trees and debris which washed down from the catchment upstream of the town. I understand that your question in relation to 'double valves' in the Burren River flood defences relates to a drainage issue that

is causing flooding to the garden of 5 Shimna Park. Officials will arrange to visit with the owner of this property as soon as possible to determine what works the Department could undertake to resolve the problem.

My Department is not aware of any culverts, for which we have a maintenance responsibility, in the Shimna Road area requiring repair. However Departmental operational teams are currently undertaking maintenance of the Shimna River to remove obstructions and debris from the channel to reduce the risk of flooding. Similar works on the Burren River will commence before the end of the month.

I am also advised NI Water are currently progressing works in the area of Newcastle that was recently affected by flooding. It is hoped that this will have a positive effect on improving the integrity of the sewerage system. In the longer term NI Water will also assess its infrastructure in the area to determine if there are any measures that could be developed to help further reduce the risk of flooding.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to carry out an investigation into the flooding incident in Newcastle.

(AQW 6970/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The flooding in Newcastle on 25 August 2020 followed a period of intense rainfall over the River Shimna catchment which resulted in a large amount of debris being carried down the river causing a blockage to a bridge on the Bryansford Road. The blockage combined with the intense rainfall is considered to be the main contributing factor to the flooding. My Department's appointed engineering consultant for the flood alleviation scheme has been asked to carry out additional flood modelling, in order to replicate the flood event which occurred on 25 August 2020 to validate the scheme design. As part of the flood alleviation project we are also investigating the installation of potential measures that may reduce the risk of future blockages at the road bridge.

My Department's officials also continue to work with multi-agency partners to aid the recovery from the flooding. This work will include a multi-agency debrief, facilitated by Local Government and supported by my Department, to identify learning for incorporation into the co-ordination, preparation, response and recovery phases to any future severe weather events. It is expected that this debrief will be undertaken in October.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the backlog caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, what measures are in place to guarantee an efficient MOT telephone answering and booking service.

(AQW 6982/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of its plan to restore services, the DVA has recently reintroduced further vehicle testing services which has significantly increased the number of customers requiring to book a test. Currently the MOT telephone booking system is the only channel available to the public for booking tests. Call volumes are almost double what they were this time last year with some customers also using the booking line to make general enquiries about DVA services, rather than using other means. Social media and other messaging is being used to help clarify the contact points that customers should use, depending on their query.

The DVA has urgently explored measures to improve this service and from 23 September introduced a new call messaging service to redirect general calls to nidirect. In addition, the call centre opening hours have been extended by an additional 2 hours from 5pm to 7pm on Monday to Wednesday. To further alleviate pressure on the MOT telephone booking system, the DVA continues to engage directly with the haulage industry, particularly those operators with large fleets, to facilitate bookings at a local test centre level where possible rather than using the booking phone line.

The DVA is also planning to reinstate its online booking service with a phased implementation from 1 October as set out in the table below.

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This should significantly reduce the demand on the MOT telephone booking system.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether consideration has been given to the creation of another railway halt between Yorkgate and Whiteabbey rail halts.[R]

(AQW 6984/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will help inform priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks, including the potential for additional railway stations on existing routes. Once I have identified my preferred options and priorities, a draft document setting these out will be issued for public consultation.

Given the severe budget pressures facing my Department during COVID-19 and the funding required to ensure the viability of Translink in the current financial year, it will be extremely challenging to fund new additions to our public transport network at this time.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has considered merging the Active School Travel Programme and the Cycling Proficiency Scheme.
(AQW 6985/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Active School Travel Programme and the Cycling Proficiency Scheme deliver training to primary school children which promotes both active travel and road safety. There is, however, an element of duplication regarding cycle training.

The Active School Travel Programme is delivered under contract by the service provider Sustrans NI. That contract is now in its final year which provides me with an opportunity to review how my Department will provide Active and Safe Travel training for children in the future.

My officials along with officials from the Public Health Agency, co-funders of the Active School Travel Programme, have already commenced work which will help inform the way forward.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what are the designated speed limits for driving through (i) villages; (ii) hamlets; and (iii) small settlements in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 6993/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads can help in this regard.

Our system of speed limits uses the presence of street lighting to distinguish between the urban and rural environments. Unless signed otherwise and in general where street lighting is present, the speed limit will be 30mph, whereas if street lighting is not present the national speed limit will apply, which on single carriageway roads is 60mph for cars.

Most villages will have street lighting and the speed limit will normally be 30mph. However, there are some exceptions and these will be signed appropriately.

The same general approach as outlined above is used for speed limits through smaller settlements.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why NI Water continued to stock Portavoe Reservoir with fish as late as August 2020, despite selling it a month later.
(AQW 6994/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) has advised me that the sale of Portavoe Reservoir was subject to a Service Level Agreement (SLA) between NI Water and DAERA Inland Fisheries. The stocking of the reservoir with fish is carried out by DAERA Inland Fisheries and this will continue in accordance with the SLA.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to list the solicitors used by NI Water for the sale of Portavoe Reservoir.
(AQW 6995/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Northern Ireland Water has advised me that the external solicitors used in the sale of Portavoe Reservoir were A&L Goodbody, 42-46 Fountain Street, Belfast, BT1 5EF.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will further invest in greenways, particularly for areas that did not benefit from the recent round of funding.
(AQW 6998/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Walking and Cycling Champion wrote to Councils in July seeking an update on the status of their greenway projects. All Councils responded. Following consideration of the proposals, I announced £2.8 million funding investment towards the development of six greenway projects, where construction could begin this financial year.

However, Councils still have an opportunity to put forward their schemes. Following my announcement, my Walking and Cycling Champion wrote to those Councils which had not received funding with an invitation to put forward business cases for their schemes. I would also encourage them to continue the momentum for delivery of greenways and advance their projects through meaningful local consultation and engagement with landowners.

I hope to be in a position to fund further greenway projects in the future. Decisions on the extent of funding for any future greenway projects will depend on the budget provided to my Department for 2021/22.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the cost of implementing the new 20mph speed limit for each school within the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency.
(AQW 7016/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In support of Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy 2020, I have committed £2m funding in this year's capital budget towards the introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits. This will allow speed limits to be progressed at around 100 schools across Northern Ireland during this financial year. It is acknowledged that these measures would benefit most schools in that they will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from their schools on a daily basis.

There are 6 sites in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency that will benefit this year from the part-time 20mph speed limit programme. Actual costs have not yet been finalised, however, it is anticipated that each scheme will cost in the region of £20k.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on her Department's planning schedule for a road improvement scheme on the A26 from Nutts Corner to the M1 at Moira; and (ii) to detail what work would be envisaged as part of this scheme.

(AQW 7024/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently preparing a draft Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) for the period to 2035, which will include improvements to the strategic road network. The A26 north of Moira is a Key Transport Corridor and will be considered in this Plan.

It is anticipated that the draft RSTNTP will be issued for full public consultation next year. The successful roads projects will be further developed through a series of scheme assessment reports in order to identify the most appropriate upgrade and the preferred route for bringing through the Statutory Procedures Phase.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much her Department has spent facilitating staff working from home.

(AQW 7042/17-22)

Ms Mallon: To date, my Department has spent £371k facilitating staff working from home. This expenditure has mainly been on the provision of IT equipment to staff.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a breakdown of the planned £20 million savings to be made by Translink, as announced on 15 September.[R]

(AQW 7067/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink has identified cost efficiencies in response to the impact of COVID-19 across its cost base. I have been assured by Translink's Chief Executive, Chris Conway, these will not impact on front line services delivered through the Public Service Agreement. However, since these are linked to a formal redundancy process which is underway, it would not be appropriate to comment further on the detail at this stage.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's funding this year for (i) road maintenance; and (ii) safety initiatives, broken down by Division.

(AQW 7072/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have maintained the opening level of investment in Capital Structural Maintenance of the road network at £75m for 2020-21, to help generate regionally balanced growth and to improve connectivity, with £10m specifically for rural roads.

I am also investing in a wide range of programmes to improve safety on the road network. This includes my commitment to spend £2m to bring about 20 mph zones outside up to 100 schools in this financial year and £4m improving Intelligent Transportation Systems, which includes the network of safety telephone points on our road network making journeys safer for all road users. The table below summarises funding for road maintenance and safety initiatives by Roads Division in the current year.

Division	Road Maintenance £k	Safety £k
East	10,611	4,891 *
North	16,408	1,355
South	22,326	1,623
West	25,497	1,066

* The £4m budget for the Intelligent Transportation Systems is included within this allocation; this is managed by my Traffic Information Control Centre (TICC) which is located within DfI Roads Eastern Division but services locations across Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to improve the (i) sewerage infrastructure; and (ii) water infrastructure in North Down.

(AQW 7080/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised by NI Water that within the current Price Control Period PC15 (2015 to 2021), a number of schemes have already been completed to address sewerage and water infrastructure issues within the North Down area. Work is currently underway in developing and delivering solutions for the sewerage network, as well as addressing wastewater treatment capacity at works within the North Down & Ards Council area such as at Ballygowan Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW), Ballywalter WwTW, Ballyhaskein WwTW and Carrowdore WwTW. This programme of work is ongoing, and will continue delivering solutions into the coming Price Control Period (PC21) relating to both network and treatment works capacity issues.

In preparing a suitable programme of work for the coming Price Control Period (PC21), spanning 2021 to 2027, a number of sewerage and water schemes were identified, prioritised and programmed for investment within Ards and North Down Borough Council, area which contains the North Down constituency.

NI Water has identified PC21 direct investment in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area in the order of £126m for the Wastewater Infrastructure and £5m for the Water Infrastructure.

In addition, there are a number of programmes of work in PC21 such as base maintenance, watermains rehabilitation and sewers rehabilitation totalling an expected investment of £1,058 million across the whole of Northern Ireland. A portion of this investment will be delivered in the North Down and Ards Borough Council area.

The work that NI Water will be able to complete between 2021 and 2017 will depend on the level of funding provided by The Executive following the Utility Regulator's assessment of the PC21 business case.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what roads are included in this year's budget for road resurfacing in North Down. (AQW 7081/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that the following roads in North Down are included within my Department's road resurfacing programme for this financial year:

- U8001 Church Drive, Bangor;
- U8001 Church Crescent, Bangor;
- U8004 Manse Road, Bangor;
- U0132 Cultra Avenue, Holywood;
- U0103 Main Street, Conlig;
- U0103 Tower Road, Conlig; and
- C0252 Gransha Road, Bangor.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what traffic calming measures are included for this year's budget for North Down. (AQW 7083/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Budgets for road safety measures are allocated on a Divisional basis rather than by council area and proposals are assessed and prioritised on that basis.

I can confirm there are plans for a Traffic Calming scheme on the Clandeboye Road in Bangor to be undertaken as part of our Local Transport Safety Measures (LTSM) programme for 2020/21. The scheme will involve provision of pedestrian refuge islands, central hatching road markings and associated signage which are appropriate measures for a road of this type.

Details of planned schemes will be included in our Annual Report to the Council which will be published over the coming months.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail plans for the maintenance depot at Balloo, Bangor. (AQW 7084/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department currently delivers road maintenance services to the Ards and North Down Borough Council area from its depot at 72 Balloo Road, Bangor. The services delivered include pothole repairs, grass cutting, gully emptying, road drainage repairs and winter gritting. Our intention is to continue with the provision of road maintenance services from this site for the foreseeable future.

Some staff from our Ards and North Down Section are currently located in a building that occupies the site adjacent to the depot. Following an efficiency review that was completed in 2019, all staff from the North Down and Ards Section will be located at the former Ards Section Office on Jubilee Road, Newtownards. This will allow the former North Down Section Office building on Balloo Road to be vacated.

While it is not currently possible to provide a definitive timescale for the amalgamation, it is anticipated it will take place during the current financial year.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she intends to allocate her Blue/Green fund. (AQW 7089/17-22)

Ms Mallon: On 10 June 2020 I announced £20 million of funding for blue/green infrastructure to be used to promote active travel and support the transformation of communities by helping shape places for everyone to live in the new normal.

As part of this, my Department wrote to all councils on 2 July 2020 seeking details of greenway projects which were ready to be taken forward. To date, £2.8 million of capital funding has been allocated to 4 councils to develop six greenway projects that are ready to be taken forward for construction in 2020/21, of which £1.1 million is expected to be spent in 2020/21. This funding will be provided on a match funding basis and will be subject to councils returning robust business cases to the Department to ensure Value for Money.

Allocation of the remainder of the £20m funding will be made available for suitable projects in due course. Decisions will be informed by ongoing engagement with stakeholders on their proposals for co-design schemes and used primarily towards projects which will help to define a sense of place and character within communities, by providing/ improving cycleways, footways and green/ blue spaces that will encourage people to walk and cycle as part of their everyday lives.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what north/south active travel projects she has identified for progressing.
(AQW 7090/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In June I committed £20 million for blue / green infrastructure and a proportion of the fund will be allocated to Councils to develop active travel schemes and greenways. My officials wrote to all Councils on 2nd July seeking details of greenway projects which were ready to be taken forward to construction this year. Following this, on 16th September 2020, I announced funding of £2.8 million to six greenway projects. A number of cross border greenway routes have been identified by Councils and my Department has written to encourage further work to be done to bring them forward.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what engagement she has had with the Minister of Education over face coverings for post-primary students on school transport services.
(AQW 7091/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have worked closely with the Minister of Education throughout the coronavirus pandemic and recovery period on many diverse issues relating to school transportation.

The Minister and I have engaged several times on the issue of face coverings for students on school transport services. The Minister for Education has produced guidance on the use of face coverings for post primary school transport services.

At present, the Regulations regarding Face Coverings require all public transport passengers aged 13 and above to wear a face covering, unless they have a valid exemption. The Regulations contain a legal exemption for school transportation services as a means to mitigate potential safeguarding issues.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans to restrict Heavy Goods Vehicles in the village of Clady, Co Tyrone.
(AQW 7110/17-22)

Ms Mallon: During the formal consultation on the proposed introduction of a 7.5 tonne weight restriction through Clady village in 2019, a number of responses were received from owners of local businesses who expressed concerns as to the potential impact of the proposed restrictions on their operations.

I am also aware that in recent weeks a lorry has damaged overhead cables in the village which has highlighted the issue. Unfortunately the follow up to the consultation exercise was delayed owing to Covid-19 restrictions, however, my officials are now seeking to re-engage with those objecting to the proposal to ensure full consideration is given to the issues raised before a decision is made regarding the next steps.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on flood defences in the village of Clady, Co Tyrone.
(AQW 7111/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The flood defences at the River Finn, which are predominantly earthen flood banks, were constructed around 60 years ago and provide some degree of protection to properties in Clady village and the surrounding area. My Department has carried out a number of flood studies to assess the level of risk to properties in this area to determine if a viable flood alleviation scheme, to enhance the level of flood protection to properties, could be taken forward.

Unfortunately overarching flood alleviation proposals, to reduce the existing flood risk to properties in Clady Village and outlying areas along the Urney Road from the River Finn, are not economically viable. However, my Department plans to carry out a localised flood alleviation scheme on the Donnygowen Burn, where it joins the River Finn. This scheme is planned to commence on site in October 2020 with an estimated cost of £300,000. The scheme will involve the construction of floodwalls, widening of an existing road bridge and associated drainage works. This scheme will reduce the risk of flooding to properties in the immediate vicinity of Clady Bridge. It is anticipated that the works will be substantially complete by March 2021.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Infrastructure what progress reports (i) she has requested of his Department's racial equality champion since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020; and (ii) her Department's racial equality champion has provided since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020.
(AQW 7118/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020 I have requested and received a progress report from my Racial Equality Champion.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of road projects completed by her Department; (ii) how many of those have not been completed on time; (iii) how long is the average delay; and (iv) the shortest and longest delay; in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7132/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Major Road Projects are defined as schemes with a capital cost in excess of £1.5m. In the last five years seven major roads projects have been completed:

- 4 schemes were completed on time or ahead of schedule.
- Over the 5 year period a total of 3 schemes were delayed which translates to an average of 21 weeks.
- Over the 5 year period the shortest delay was 6 weeks and the longest delay was 31 weeks.

The details on completion (measured against the final completion date as determined by the mechanism of the contract) are as follows:

Scheme	Date Opening to Traffic	Comment on Completion
A8 Belfast to Larne	29 May 2015	Completed on time
A2 Widening at Greenisland	28 September 2015	Completed on time
A31 Magherafelt Bypass	6 October 2016	Completed 3 weeks ahead of schedule
Malcolm Road / Gilford Road (Millennium Way) Lurgan	12 May 2017	26 week delay
A26 Glarryford A44 Dualling	6 June 2017	Completed on time
M1 & M2 Busways	11 March 2019	6 week delay
A5/B48 Strathroy Link Road	8 November 2019	31 week delay

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a timeframe for the completion of a review of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement, as outlined in the Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland, to ensure that measures to promote nature in planning decisions remain appropriate.

(AQW 7138/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) already recognises that sustaining and enhancing biodiversity is fundamental to furthering sustainable development which is at the heart of the planning system. It, therefore, plays a positive part in seeking to halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services as outlined in the Biodiversity Strategy. Its provisions must be taken into account in the preparation of Local Development Plans (LDPs) and the SPPS is also material to all decisions on individual planning applications and appeals. Importantly, the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) carried out in the process of formulating the SPPS found that, as a whole, it is strongly positive for the environment and overall sustainability.

I fully recognise the importance of ensuring regional planning policy is fit for purpose and that it is revised, where appropriate, informed by the evidence. My officials continually keep the SPPS under review and have identified some areas such as renewable energy and development in the countryside that require further work. I will be considering the evidence gathered to inform my decision on the best way forward for these important policy areas.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the residential nature of the area, what plans her Department has to deal with the high volume of traffic that uses Orpen Park and the surrounding streets daily to avoid Finaghy crossroads.

(AQW 7141/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials have been engaging with the residents of Orpen Park and elected representatives regarding their concerns about increased traffic movements within Orpen Park and adjacent streets with a view to identifying and developing potential solutions to address the issue. As well as a number of face-to-face meetings, my officials have completed additional traffic surveys within Orpen Park and carried out checks on traffic signal equipment, including sequencing timings, at Finaghy Cross Roads.

I am pleased to be able to confirm that my officials will shortly be carrying out a formal consultation in relation to the potential installation of traffic calming measures on Orpen Drive, Orpen Road and Porter Park. It is hoped implementation of these measures will act as a deterrent to drivers currently using Orpen Park as a shortcut to avoid the traffic lights at Finaghy Crossroads.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the spending from the Blue/Green Fund that has been allocated to date. [R]

(AQW 7155/17-22)

Ms Mallon: On 10 June 2020 I announced £20 million of funding for blue/green infrastructure to be used to promote active travel and support the transformation of communities by helping shape places for everyone to live in the new normal.

As part of this, my Department wrote to all councils on 2 July 2020 seeking details of greenway projects which were ready to be taken forward. To date, £2.8 million of capital funding has been allocated to 4 councils to develop six greenway projects that are ready to be taken forward for construction in 2020/21 of which £1.1m is expected to be spent in 2020/21. This funding will be provided on a match funding basis and will be subject to councils returning robust business cases to the Department to ensure Value for Money.

Allocation of the remainder of the £20m funding will be made available for suitable projects in due course. Decisions will be informed by ongoing engagement with stakeholders on their proposals for co-design schemes and used primarily towards projects which will help to define a sense of place and character within communities, by providing/ improving cycleways, footways and green/ blue spaces that will encourage people to walk and cycle as part of their everyday lives.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all of the schemes that have successfully bid for funding from the Blue/Green Fund to date. [R]

(AQW 7156/17-22)

Ms Mallon: On 10 June 2020 I announced £20 million of funding for blue/green infrastructure to be used to promote active travel and support the transformation of communities by helping shape places for everyone to live in the new normal.

To date, £2.8 million of capital funding has been allocated to 4 councils to develop six greenway projects that are ready to be taken forward for construction in 2020/21, of which some £1.1m is expected to be spent in 2020/21. This funding will be provided on a match funding basis and will be subject to councils returning robust business cases to the Department to ensure Value for Money. These projects are:

- Forth Meadow Community Greenway (Belfast City Council)
- Lagan Gateway Greenway (Belfast City Council)
- Strabane North Greenway (Derry City and Strabane District Council)
- Strathfoyle Greenway –(Derry City and Strabane District Council)
- Banbridge Riverside Walk (Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council)
- North Down Coastal Path (Ards and North Down Borough Council)

I have also allocated funding from my Blue/Green Fund to support cycleways, social distancing projects and blue infrastructure.

A number of other proposals are currently being worked up and I will make further announcements shortly.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all of the schemes that have unsuccessfully bid for funding from the Blue/Green Fund to date. [R]

(AQW 7157/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that Councils have not made any unsuccessful bids for Greenway funding from the Blue/Green Infrastructure fund.

My Walking and Cycling Champion wrote to Councils in July seeking an update on the status of their greenway projects. Those Councils who did not identify any greenway projects that were ready for construction this financial year have been asked to submit a business case for the proposals they had identified where construction could start in the next financial year (2021/22), subject to the agreement of a business case and Department of Finance approval.

Any decision regarding potential funding in the future will depend on budget allocations to the Department in 2021/22 and beyond.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all schemes that have bid for funding from the Blue/Green Fund that are currently under consideration. [R]

(AQW 7158/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have so far allocated funding from my Blue/Green Fund to support greenways, cycleways, social distancing projects and blue infrastructure.

A number of other proposals are currently being worked up and I will make further announcements shortly. No schemes have been turned down for funding.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) any discussions involving her Department and its agencies in relation to the Creggan Reservoirs and any assessed flooding risk; and (ii) the roles and responsibilities of her Department and its agencies in relation to any flooding risk.

(AQW 7161/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is a statutory consultee in the planning process and provides flood risk and drainage advice to planning authorities in respect of river coastal, surface water and reservoir flooding. As part of this process, my Department has been consulted in relation to the flood risk associated with proposed development within the inundation area of both Upper and Lower Creggan reservoirs. To date neither the local Council who own the reservoirs, nor Creggan Country Park, who lease the site containing the reservoirs from the Council, can provide adequate assurances in relation to reservoir safety to allow the Department to provide a positive consultation response, in accordance with planning policy.

To assist Council and the Department for Communities, discussions are ongoing with the owner and manager of these reservoirs to explore how the reservoirs at Creggan Country Park may obtain adequate assurances in relation to reservoir safety.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will meet urgently with representatives of the taxi industry, who she met during a protest at Stormont in June, in order to discuss financial support to the taxi industry.

(AQW 7166/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am meeting with a number of representatives from the taxi industry (both public and private hire) via a zoom call on Wednesday 30th September. The invitations issued on 21st September and include the representatives I met at Stormont in June.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how park and ride projects are selected for funding.

(AQW 7174/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's Park and Ride Programme Board, with representatives drawn from relevant Departmental areas and Translink, identifies strategic locations and opportunities. Potential projects are prioritised for funding considering a number of key factors including; service demand, active travel integration, existing public transport provision, land availability, cost and planning.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to expand the Active School Travel Programme.

(AQW 7175/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Active School Travel programme is delivered on behalf of my Department and the Public Health Agency (who jointly fund the programme) under contract by Sustrans NI. That contract is now in its final year which provides me with an opportunity to review how my Department will encourage active and safe school travel for children in the future.

My officials together with the Public Health Agency have already undertaken work to inform the way forward and I hope to make decisions by the end of the year. Expansion of important programs of this nature going forward will be dependent on the resource budget allocated to my Department.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department is responding to the impact of climate change on flood risk.

(AQW 7176/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department issued updated guidance, in February 2019 – 'Technical Flood Risk Guidance in relation to Allowances for Climate Change in Northern Ireland'. This is used by officials to inform allowances to be made for Climate Change, in the design of our flood alleviation and drainage infrastructure schemes. The guidance looks forward towards the end of this century, in terms of allowances to be applied in relation to potential increases in river flood flows, sea level rise and surface water flooding due to higher rainfall intensities. The allowances set out in the guidance are also incorporated into a comprehensive suite of flood maps, developed by my Department, which are publicly accessible through 'Flood Maps NI'. This information is key in providing flood risk advice to Planning Authorities, to inform their development decisions and Local Development Plan process.

My Department has also developed very effective emergency response arrangements with our multi agency partners to improve our preparedness for any increase in flooding events as a result of climate change.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what projects have been identified for the next round of park and ride investment.

(AQW 7177/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to developing sustainable transport projects to support the green recovery and the expansion of the Park and Ride programme is an integral part of my commitment to encourage the use of public transport alternatives for commuting.

A number of prospective sites have been identified for the development of Park and Ride projects right across the road and rail network. I recently announced the development of projects in Downpatrick, Comber, Newtownards, Cairnshill in Belfast and Trooperslane in Carrickfergus, and I hope to announce the second phase of Park and Ride projects for this financial year in the coming months. Further expansion of the park and ride network in the next financial year and beyond will be dependent on the funding allocated to my Department.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department plans to reconvene the Motorcycle Safety Forum with other agencies and representative bodies.

(AQW 7179/17-22)

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 pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists.

The Motorcycle Safety Forum (MSF) was created in 2011 and was made up of representatives of motorcycle interest groups, trainers and statutory agencies. The last meeting of the MSF took place in October 2018.

As work progresses to replace the Road Safety Strategy 2020, vulnerable road users, including motorcyclists, will be key stakeholders. There will be a public consultation on the replacement for the current Road Safety Strategy, and I will ensure that all user groups, including motorcyclists, have ample opportunity to contribute. My officials will continue to respond to any motorcycle safety issues brought to the Department's attention.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what research her Department has carried out into flyrock incidents beyond blast zones in local quarries.

(AQW 7180/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I would refer the member to my related response to AQW 7181/17-22 and advise that the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland [HSENI] are the appropriate authority for investigating flyrock incidents at quarries which are reported under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (NI) 1997 [RIDROR].

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department undertakes to measure incidents of flyrock, the unexpected projection of blasted rock segments, from quarries in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7181/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In accordance with The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrence Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 incidents involving flyrock are required to be reported to the enforcing authority. In Northern Ireland, the enforcing authority is the Health and Safety Executive NI.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure what road resurfacing projects are planned for Upper Bann during this financial year.

(AQW 7202/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that the following roads in the Upper Bann area are included in my Department's resurfacing programme for this financial year:

- | | |
|---|--|
| ■ Highfield Grove; | ■ Monbrief Road East; |
| ■ Drumnacaney Road (on site); | ■ Selshion Parade & Hartmore Gardens, Portadown; |
| ■ Fitzgerald Park/Old Rectory Park/Tullyronan Park; | ■ Huntley Road, Banbridge; |
| ■ Derrylee Road; | ■ Lisnasure Road, Donaghcloney; |
| ■ Regents Park, Lurgan; | ■ Main Street Donaghcloney (on site); and |
| ■ Lake Road, Craigavon; | ■ Quarry Road, Banbridge. |

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on a new park and ride facility in Strabane town.

(AQW 7209/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to developing sustainable transport projects to support the green recovery and the expansion of the Park and Ride programme is an integral part of my commitment to encourage the use of public transport alternatives for commuting. In this regard the existing park and ride facility located within Strabane bus station provides an important facility for those wishing to travel by public transport.

A recent study has been completed considering possible locations to provide additional park and ride capacity in Strabane, particularly in the context of the new A5WTC proposal and other planned development in the town.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the timeframe for the resumption of practical driving tests for taxi drivers.

(AQW 7240/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of the phased resumption of practical driving tests, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has reinstated some driver testing services, where testing can be done safely in line with Public Health Agency advice and guidance on social distancing requirements. This includes motorcycle driver testing from 6 July and tests for drivers of buses, tractors and module 4 CPC tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers from 20 July. Practical car and lorry driving tests resumed from 1 September 2020, initially prioritising those requests from key workers followed by those customers whose tests were cancelled due to lockdown. The online booking service for car and motorcycle practical driving tests is reopening to other customers from 5 October.

The DVA is working hard to reinstate other practical driving tests as soon as possible, including the practical driving test for taxi drivers. However, due to the longer duration of this test, it must be fully risk assessed to ensure it can be delivered safely in line with PHA advice and guidance. Once this service can resume safely I will ensure this is clearly communicated to all affected customers.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will prioritise the resumption of practical driving tests for those who require a driving licence to conduct their jobs.

(AQW 7244/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of the phased resumption of practical driving tests, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has reinstated a number of driver testing services, where testing can be done safely in line with Public Health Agency advice and guidance on social distancing requirements. This includes motorcycle driver testing from 6 July and tests for drivers of buses, tractors and module 4 CPC tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers from 20 July.

Practical car and lorry driving tests resumed from 1 September 2020, initially prioritising around 200 high priority workers who have previously requested an urgent driving test and were at that time on a waiting list. The DVA is continuing to process requests for high priority workers and these customers will also be offered driving test appointments. Driving tests are also being offered to those customers who had a driving test booked between March and June, but whose tests were cancelled due to the lockdown measures imposed to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

The DVA is making good progress in delivering driving tests for these customers and is anticipating a resumption of its normal service delivery from October/ November. I fully appreciate there are many legitimate reasons why customers will want to take their practical driving test at the earliest opportunity, for prioritisation to be effective as I hope you understand, it needs to be focussed and be able to be managed by the DVA. The DVA is planning to reopen bookings for all new customers from 5 October and to increase capacity for driving tests to deal with the likely high demand when normal service resumes. In doing so, this will improve driving tests services for all our customers.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in regard to the social and economic benefits to the people of Derry by expanding the A2 and the principles of co-design, why her Department rejected proposals altering proposed plans for the A2 from local businesses at Whitehouse Retail Park.

(AQW 7247/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In June, I announced my commitment to fund the continued development of a number of Strategic Road Improvement schemes, including the A2 Buncrana Road, as part of my plan to aid economic recovery and community transformation, while addressing regional imbalance and my Department is continuing the progress the scheme

In March, just before lockdown, I met with Retail NI and business owners located adjacent to this road as I was keen to hear their concerns and views including suggestions for alternative access arrangements at Whitehouse Retail Park. I have asked my officials to continue their discussions with all stakeholders over the coming months while progressing scheme development, in particular to ensure that it meets road safety, traffic progression, sustainable transport and other objectives, before I decide on the next steps.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a breakdown of the religious makeup of the engineering staff at Translink depots.

(AQW 7250/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below provides religious makeup of engineering staff at Translink depots at 1 January 2020.

Translink Engineering Staff

Engineering Staff	Protestant	%	Roman Catholic	%	Neither	%	Grand Total
01.01.2020	479	68.53%	212	30.33%	8	1.14%	699

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the Driver and Vehicle Agency will allow those who need a vehicle for their job to access testing services.

(AQW 7259/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of the phased resumption of practical driving tests, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has reinstated a number of driver testing services, where testing can be done safely in line with Public Health Agency advice and guidance on social distancing requirements. This includes motorcycle driver testing from 6 July and tests for drivers of buses, tractors and module 4 CPC tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers from 20 July.

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Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the reduction in bus services in the Newry and Armagh constituency since March 2020; and (ii) what routes have since recommenced.
(AQW 7260/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

(i) **The following route changes have been implemented since March 2020:**

- 23rd March - School and University services withdrawn.
- 30th March – Service frequency reverted to an enhanced Saturday timetable for Mon-Fri operation, normal Saturday, and normal Sunday timetable with minor amendments (e.g. reduction of seasonal/tourist services) and some peak enhancements to key services for essential workers.
- 20th April - Off peak services reduced with peak enhancements and additional hospital services for key workers (Goldline, Town Services passing Hospitals & key routes).

(ii) **The following route changes have been implemented since May 2020:**

- 11th May - Some Goldline, Urby and key services enhanced with additional frequency to increase capacity and assist social distancing.
- 1st June - Additional frequency across a number of routes to further increase capacity and assist social distancing.
- 29th June - Frequency and peak service enhancements to expand capacity and assist social distancing.
- 1st September – Reintroduction of schools transport and other services.
- 20th/21st September – Reintroduction of University services.

Services across the public transport network including Newry and Armagh continue to be adapted in line with COVID-19 restrictions to assist social distancing and schools transport.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department have to include the Jordanstown Road, which has Rostulla and Jordanstown special needs schools in addition to Ulster University on it, in the 20mph speed limit schemes.
(AQW 7266/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In support of Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy 2020, I have committed £2m funding from this year's capital budget towards the introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits. This will benefit 100 schools across Northern Ireland by increasing driver awareness and reducing vehicle speeds ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer at these locations.

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 100 in this year's programme. I am determined that using the roads around all of our schools will be safer for everyone, and it is my intention that through future programmes many more schools will have a part-time 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates. Please be assured that both of these schools will be considered for inclusion in future programmes, the scale of which will be dependent on the funding allocated to my department.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the road resurfacing projects planned for the Strangford constituency during this financial year.
(AQW 7273/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that the following roads within the Strangford constituency are included within my Department's road resurfacing programme for this financial year:

- C271 Kilcarn Road Killinchy;
- C271 Saintfield Road, Killinchy;

- A23 Belfast Road, Ballygowan;
- C254 Grangee Road, Carrowdore;
- U0112 Ballybuttle Road, Millisle;
- A23 Moneyreagh Road;
- Clealough Road Killyleagh;
- A49 Lisburn Street, Ballynahinch; and
- A21 Saintfield Road, Ballynahinch.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail the amount of funding being allocated to the (a) Comber; and (b) Newtownards park and ride projects; and (ii) for an update on progress for both sites.

(AQW 7274/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While my Department has identified bus based park and ride sites in Newtownards and Comber, both projects are at an early stage of development: Newtownards – my Department and Ards and North Down Council are now engaging LPS as honest broker to conduct a full survey of the site to confirm the current market value and establish any derivation from the current estimate of £1.5m. Comber Park & Ride – The project is a new park and ride facility on the A22 Belfast Road Comber at the entrance to the Greenway. The funding of £100k will allow for surveys and detailed design by consultants to secure planning approval. The £4m funding package I recently allocated will permit officials to progress these two projects as well as the others announced in phase one.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will arrange for individuals to carry out their driving theory test in Enniskillen, rather than having to travel to Omagh.

(AQW 7275/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The existing network of theory test centres was developed to provide the best balance between accessibility and value for money for customers. The six existing theory test centres are leased by Pearson VUE, the contractors who deliver the theory test for the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA). The current site in Omagh was chosen for its central location in relation to Counties Tyrone and Fermanagh, being approximately equidistant from Strabane, Cookstown, Enniskillen and Dungannon and to date it has served the needs of its customers well.

The DVA is required to operate on a full cost recovery basis. Therefore any increased provision of additional theory test centres would result in an increase in the overall costs of providing the service, which would result in an increase in theory test fees.

Given the unprecedented circumstances we are in, I am currently content that the location of the six existing theory test centres strikes the correct balance between accessibility and cost and will of course continue to keep the situation under review.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) why drink-drive rehabilitation courses are not available to members of the public who wish to undertake them online; and (ii) whether she will consider making these courses available to do online as is the case in other parts of these Islands.

(AQW 7382/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Courses for drink drive offenders (CDDO) were suspended in March 2020 because it was not possible to deliver them safely and in compliance with Public Health Agency advice and guidance on social distancing. For those who had already commenced a course prior to the suspension, I agreed that their training could be completed using a suitable online platform.

My priority was, and remains, the safety of both clients and trainers - and taking the right steps to maintain delivery and quality of important services in Northern Ireland. At that point I was unable to support a wider online approach due to a lack of evidence on whether it would deliver the main objective of the classroom based course i.e. to reduce repeat offending behaviours.

I was also mindful that anyone convicted of a drink driving offence in Northern Ireland is generally disqualified for a minimum 12 months 'until tested'. This means a driver must pass the theory and practical driving tests before getting a full licence restored. Therefore satisfactory completion of a CDDO course without the capacity to re-sit a driving test (which I also had to suspend due to Covid-19 restrictions) would mean that a driving licence could still not be restored.

With the Covid-19 situation we are learning quickly and more evidence is now available on what can be achieved via a virtual classroom. I am satisfied that an appropriate level of engagement and group participation can be achieved in this setting. I therefore want to build on this experience and have already approved the future use of online training, where appropriate, in order to provide both safe and appropriate training solutions during this period of uncertainty.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration she has given regarding the decarbonisation of the rail network.

(AQW 7408/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Tackling the climate emergency is the single biggest global challenge we face. I am focused on delivering clean public transport and active travel options to build connectivity, reduce emissions and promote health and well-being for all.

I have asked Translink to investigate options for decarbonising the rail network and this will involve looking at electrification, hydrogen or a combination of both. The replacement of old rolling stock with newer, more sustainable technology will not only deliver an enhanced and more attractive transport option, but will also move us closer towards our goal of zero carbon emissions.

New rolling stock must be future proofed to take into account any potential electrification of the route between Belfast and Dublin. The timescales for potential electrification are long term, so any rolling stock option must have the capability of being easily converted to full electric operation, or any suitable alternative zero emission propulsion type. Future propulsion types may include bi-mode, tri mode or hybrid, with the eventual transition to full zero emissions operation.

However, given the severe budget pressures facing my Department during COVID-19 and the funding required to ensure the viability of Translink, there will be significant challenges in providing new public transport infrastructure without additional funding being allocated from the Finance Minister and the Executive. Nevertheless, this is an area that I remain committed to, and I will continue to seek support from my Executive colleagues to deliver on my ambitions.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what support is provided to staff at bus and train stations to enforce the mandatory use of face coverings.

(AQW 7415/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Prior to the introduction of the mandatory requirement for passengers to wear face coverings on public transport, my Department issued guidance to public transport operators on safer travel and has provided ongoing advice to Translink on its obligations under the new Regulations.

In relation to enforcement, the approach adopted by the Department and by Translink is one of education, engagement and encouragement first, and the aim is to achieve high rates of compliance rather than high rates of enforcement. To raise awareness of the new requirements, Translink has invested heavily in communicating to passengers through social media, as well as a public information campaign and compliance rates are now around 85% across Translink services.

Translink has also issued guidance to all its staff on enforcement of the Regulations, including advice on dealing sensitively with passengers who may be exempt from the requirement because of an illness or disability. Translink staff are to remind passengers of their legal obligation and actively encourage passengers to wear appropriate face coverings. If a passenger, without a reasonable excuse, refuses to wear a face covering following a staff member's request, Translink has advised staff to allow the customer to travel, but to note the service, time and boarding point and report this to their Control/Inspector team as soon as reasonably possible. This information helps Translink identify issues/services on which it needs to raise awareness and, if necessary, engage with the PSNI to assist with enforcement and where appropriate, issue a fixed penalty notice.

Translink is also carrying a new advertising campaign to remind passengers of the need to maintain social distancing, practise good hand hygiene, the need to wear face coverings and the use of contactless ticketing.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will commit to carrying out an assessment for controlled pedestrian crossing facilities at the new build McDonalds restaurant on the McKinsty Road, West Belfast, in advance of the opening of this restaurant.

(AQW 7497/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that assessments for provision of controlled crossings are carried out in line with my Department's policy RSPPG E005, which prescribes the requirement to carry out a survey at the site. However, my officials advise it would be best to await the completion and opening of the new McDonalds restaurant so the findings of the assessment reflect the most up-to-date traffic patterns, including crossings made by pedestrians.

I have therefore asked officials to carry out the survey later in autumn 2020.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure what precautions DVA enforcement staff are taking to protect themselves and the driver from COVID-19 when stopping and inspecting vehicles.

(AQW 7516/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The DVA has carried out an extensive review of its compliance and enforcement safe working practices to ensure that all relevant control measures relating to COVID-19 have been incorporated into the risk assessments that apply when stopping and inspecting vehicles.

One of the key risks identified is interaction with drivers and the potential of contracting or spreading COVID-19. In order to mitigate against this risk, and to meet PHA guidelines in relation to social distancing, enforcement officers will use dot matrix signage on their vehicles to direct and escort vehicles from roads to safe designated areas for inspection. Officers will also use driver information placards and mobile telephone communication as an additional control measure where required. This ensures that drivers receive clear instruction in respect of the checks that will be carried out at the roadside and that they only leave the controls of their vehicle where it becomes absolutely necessary.

All enforcement officers have been provided with face coverings and are required to use a range of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) including the use of mechanical document grabs and single use disposable seat covers. Drivers are also afforded access to toilet and hand washing facilities at all weighbridge sites.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions she has had with the Minister for Transport in Dublin prior to, and since, Bus Éireann's decision to cut their Dublin to Belfast service.

(AQW 7777/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I was informed by Minister Ryan's office on Saturday 26 September that the Bus Éireann Board would be recommending the indefinite suspension of the Belfast – Dublin service.

I am committed to securing island wide services between Belfast and Dublin and will be discussing this matter with Minister Ryan while at next week's NSMC Transport meeting. My Department will continue to work to provide services for our communities North-South and will work with Translink minimise the overall impact to passengers.

Department of Justice

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice what opportunities there are for women to disclose domestic abuse in the criminal justice system through engagement with (i) the Probation Board Northern Ireland; (ii) the Northern Ireland Prison Service; and (iii) the PSNI.

(AQW 6800/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I recognise that women who have been subjected to domestic abuse often encounter barriers to disclosure. I want to ensure the criminal justice system does not add to this. There are opportunities for disclosure throughout a woman's engagement with the criminal justice system, from first contact, to pre-sentencing, community supervision, and at any time whilst in custody. Opportunities include, but are not limited to:

- when brought into police custody women (and men) will be seen by a qualified doctor or nurse who will assess their fitness and general health. Additionally, medical staff will try to ascertain the circumstances of any unexplained injuries. A pre-release medical examination is also provided to vulnerable persons on their departure from custody. If a disclosure is made while in police custody, this will, by consent, be documented and immediately referred to the Public Protection Branch. An investigation will commence and risk assessment will be carried out;
- Probation Officers routinely engage with women on a range of issues, including any history of domestic abuse, providing an opportunity for disclosure, safety planning and referral to a range of support services for advice and intervention; and
- the Northern Ireland Prison Service provides opportunities for disclosure, such as during the committal interview and specific support is provided to victims through the Women's Support Officer.

To ensure disclosure is facilitated in an appropriate and safe environment, police, probation and prison staff are trained to adopt a trauma informed approach, including recognising the signs of domestic abuse. A range of services are also available to support victims and to challenge offending behaviour.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice what steps she will take to enhance measures of support, including counselling, for police and prison officers dealing with victims and perpetrators of increasing harmful crime, including child sexual abuse and exploitation.

(AQW 6859/17-22)

Mrs Long: The health and wellbeing of PSNI officers and staff is a matter for the Chief Constable. You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

However, I am aware of the comments made in the latest inspection report on how well the PSNI treats its workforce and the people of Northern Ireland issued by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, which referred to long waiting times for accessing mental health support. I am pleased to note that the PSNI are currently recruiting new mental health professionals to help reduce the waiting times.

There are a range of ongoing support measures in place for prison officers including the Welfare Support Service, and Inspire which has a 24/7 telephone helpline and runs counselling sessions. NIPS also has a formal agreement in place with the Police Rehabilitation & Retraining Trust (PRRT) to provide physiotherapy & psychological services to Prison Officers who are absent from work through illness.

I have also launched a focused review of the support mechanisms and procedures the Prison Service has in place to ascertain if more could be done to help the wellbeing of frontline staff. The review is due to report by 31 October 2020.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice what the average time is for probate to be granted for probate applications broken down by (i) personal applications; and (ii) solicitor-led applications made on or after the 1 February 2020.

(AQW 6868/17-22)

Mrs Long: The average time for Grants to issue during the period 1 February – 31 August 2020 is set out the table below. This is measured from the date the probate application was confirmed to have been presented correctly until the date of issue of the grant.

In light of the coronavirus pandemic, the Probate Master of the High Court suspended the issue of all grants from 19 March until 23 April 2020. This intervention inevitably affected the timeline for checking applications and issuing grants.

Social distancing measures which were implemented in accordance with advice from the Public Health Agency restricted the number of staff who could work safely and most effectively in the workplace, leading to a build-up of applications and correspondence. As a consequence, the normal timeline for assessing an application before confirming it was correct will not have been met. The actual waiting time for processing those applications received after the 18 March is therefore likely to be up to 8 weeks.

Probate Grants Issued – 1st February 2020 to 31st August 2020 ^P

	Average time in Weeks	Number of Cases
By solicitor	2.76	1914
Personal	2.44	58
Total	2.75	1972

Source: ICOS

^P Provisional Figures

Time in weeks measured from date correct papers received to date grant issued

The Covid-19 pandemic has imposed unprecedented challenges, but the NICTS has made concerted efforts to recover operations notwithstanding the constraints associated with social distancing and Covid-19 restrictions.

Alternative accommodation was sourced to allow more staff to attend the workplace and additional resources have been diverted to the probate office where possible to support the recovery of business and eliminate the backlogs.

The NICTS also developed alternative administrative arrangements and put in place physical modifications to allow the office to resume processing personal applications on 24 August 2020. Personal applicants will also be offered appointments over the weekend to minimise any delays at that stage of the process.

While it will inevitably take some time to eliminate the backlog, the NICTS continues to employ all efforts to progress applications as quickly as possible.

One of the projects currently being progressed this year as part of the NICTS Modernisation Programme is the development of a new online service for Probate which will enable personal applicants and solicitors to apply online for a Grant of Probate.

The number of applications awaiting a grant of probate at 22 September 2020, and the status of those applications is set out in the table below. It is not possible to provide a comparison with 2019 as that information is not held.

Applications currently awaiting a grant of probate

	Number of Applications	
Solicitor led	509	Applications lodged before 18 March 2020 which have been checked and returned because amendments are required.
	1011	Applications lodged between 18 March - 22 September 2020 which have been checked and returned because amendments are required.
	687	Applications to be checked
Personal	50	Statement of Truth (SoT) has been prepared and issued to the applicant to check and sign.
	177	SoT has been prepared and is ready for issue to the applicant. The Probate office expects to issue all SoT by 4/10/20
	10	Applications lodged after 24 August 2020– SoT to be prepared.
Total	2444	

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice what measures have been put in place to expedite the current backlog in applications for Grant of Probate.

(AQW 6869/17-22)

Mrs Long: The average time for Grants to issue during the period 1 February – 31 August 2020 is set out the table below. This is measured from the date the probate application was confirmed to have been presented correctly until the date of issue of the grant.

In light of the coronavirus pandemic, the Probate Master of the High Court suspended the issue of all grants from 19 March until 23 April 2020. This intervention inevitably affected the timeline for checking applications and issuing grants.

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Total	2444	

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice to outline how many applications for Probate are currently awaiting a Grant of Probate, broken down by (i) personal applications; and (ii) solicitor-led applications, with a comparison to 2019.

(AQW 6870/17-22)

Mrs Long: The average time for Grants to issue during the period 1 February – 31 August 2020 is set out the table below. This is measured from the date the probate application was confirmed to have been presented correctly until the date of issue of the grant.

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Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Justice what progress reports (i) she has requested of her Department's racial equality champion since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020; and (ii) her Department's racial equality champion has provided since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020.

(AQW 7030/17-22)

Mrs Long: A key role of the Department's Racial Equality Champion is to support delivery of the cross-Departmental Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025.

A number of actions have been taken by the Racial Equality Champion to promote awareness of the Racial Equality Strategy within the Department, emphasising the importance of racial equality and good race relations as well as being the senior point of contact for issues relating to racial equality.

In terms of reporting, the Racial Equality Champion provides updates on racial equality issues as part of the normal business of the Department.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoners (i) could be held; and (ii) are anticipated to be held, within the new unit at HMP Hydebank Wood women's prison.

(AQW 7032/17-22)

Mrs Long: Landing 4, Fern House, Hydebank Wood Secure College and Women's Prison can accommodate eight women on a single occupancy basis, in line with Northern Ireland Prison Service policy. At present there are three women being held in Fern 4.

It wouldn't be appropriate to speculate on the number that may be accommodated in the unit in the future.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the cost of establishing the new unit at HMP Hydebank Wood women's prison; and (ii) the anticipated cost of running it per year.

(AQW 7033/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service has undertaken extensive security upgrades, structural, electrical and mechanical work at a cost of approximately £482,000 on Landing 4, Fern House, Hydebank Wood Secure College and Women's Prison.

The additional annual resource costs are estimated to be £355,000.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice how child protection services support children and young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

(AQW 7063/17-22)

Mrs Long: Child Protection issues and Child Protection investigations are managed and overseen by all agencies of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI), in particular the Health and Social Care Trusts and the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI). Other criminal justice partners, for example the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) and the Youth Justice Agency (YJA), are full statutory partners of SBNI. As members of SBNI my agencies have a responsibility to ensure that all children are properly safeguarded. Safeguarding children is central to the work of the criminal justice system and as such my agencies work collaboratively to ensure the highest protection of children is afforded. Staff are trained to identify child protection concerns and urgent referrals are made to the Trust(s) where such concerns are identified. Children in the criminal justice system retain their right of access to universal services and as such child protection services offer their full support to children who are referred to them. The Children's Services Co Operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 strengthens the onus on all Departments and Agencies to work together in sharing information and concerns about children and young people in their charge, further reinforcing and supporting effective, joined up child protection services.

The NSPCC Young Witness Service is funded by my Department to provide help and support to young prosecution witnesses of crime called to give evidence in court. The support provided assists young witnesses to give their best evidence. Also, Victim Support Northern Ireland is funded by my Department to provide a range of support services to all victims of crime, including young victims. The Department also provides Registered Intermediaries (RIs) who are communication specialists that assist vulnerable children and adults with significant communication deficits to communicate their answers more effectively during police interview and when giving evidence at trial.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what action she will take, along with the Northern Ireland Prison Service Director General, to address the chronic understaffing of Night Custody Officers (NCO) at HMP Maghaberry; (i) to detail the number of NCO's that should be on duty within the prison; (ii) how many times this staffing level has not been met in the last 6 months; and (iii) by how many it was short.

(AQW 7100/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service launched a recruitment competition for Night Custody Officers on 2 March 2020. Interviews concluded on 28 August with pre-employment checks currently taking place.

The welfare and safety of staff and prisoners is paramount. In the interests of good order & discipline, and security and safety, neither the Prison Service nor the Department of Justice comment upon staffing deployment levels within any of the prison establishments.

The Governor and Senior Management Team at Maghaberry Prison scrutinise all staffing figures daily, including the night staff deployment, and will redeploy staff where necessary. This process ensures that adequate numbers are on duty at all times.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice in light of the Annual Report of the Anti-Slavery Commissioner; (i) what evidence there is that children are being groomed by paramilitaries in Northern Ireland; (ii) what purpose these children are being groomed for; and (iii) what interventions have been developed and utilised to address the grooming of children by paramilitaries.

(AQW 7178/17-22)

Mrs Long: There is significant evidence from academic research, attitudinal surveys, and delivery partners who work with young people that paramilitaries have a destructive impact on young people in our society who live in areas where there is a paramilitary presence.

This harm can manifest itself in “grooming” – where paramilitaries seek to build relationships and trust with young people so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them. The outcome of this is often that young people fall victim to, or witness, brutal assaults. They may also be subjected to threats and intimidation; or become involved in general criminality; or targeted for recruitment into paramilitary organisations. The long term effect of this harm can be profound, long lasting, and cannot be underestimated.

You will be aware that a key priority of the cross Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime is to ensure that young people are protected from the harm caused by paramilitary and organised crime groups. This involves implementation of both a robust law enforcement response in respect of those who persist in such activity; and intensive work across the Executive, in partnership with the voluntary and community sector and the wider community, to ensure that we collectively support young people to avoid, and be resilient to, paramilitary influence.

Initiatives under the Programme include: projects which aim to build relationships with young people who are identified as being at higher risk of involvement in criminality; early intervention work in areas where there is paramilitary activity; multi-agency approaches which aim to support particularly vulnerable young people or problem-solve on a locality basis; and educational and awareness raising projects which highlight the risks and engage young people in discussion about the issues that affect them. The Programme also delivers projects which aim to build the capacity and capability of people from a range of sectors who work with young people at risk of paramilitary harm or criminality.

This work is having a demonstrable impact on the lives of young people most at risk from paramilitary activity and coercive control.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) a breakdown of the number of penalties issued in response to suspected breaches of COVID-19 regulations; and (ii) her assessment of the number of penalties in relation to the number of breaches.

(AQW 7205/17-22)

Mrs Long: Figures sourced from the Police Service of Northern Ireland have been provided in the table, which gives details of Prohibition Notices, Penalty Notices for Disorder (PNDs) (and Community Resolution Notices (CRNs) issued for Breaches of the Health Protection Regulations since their introduction until 10:00hrs on 22/9/20. Over the period, 1,500 Prohibition Notices, Penalty Notices or Community Resolution Notices were issued.

	CRN	PND
Contravention of a requirement under regulation 3, 4, 6 or 7	45	145
Contravention of requirement in Regulation 5	708	521
Obstruction of any person carrying out a function under the Regulations	4	3
Contravention of a direction or failure to comply with a reasonable instruction or a prohibition notice given under Regulation 7	5	31
Contravention of a requirement under Regulation 4 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus International Travel) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020	0	7

	Private Dwelling	Licensed Premises
Prohibition Notice	8	23

It is important to note that the PSNI is not the only organisation with the power to issue Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) in respect of breaches of COVID regulations. Local councils, Border Force and any other body designated by DoH can also issue FPNs.

The total number of reports received by PSNI via all channels (telephone, in person and online) relating to Covid is 12,131. The number of reports may contain multiple reports of the same alleged breach and alleged breaches which upon further investigation proved not to be breaches. Further, the number of reports received by other enforcement bodies is not available to the Department. It is, therefore, difficult to assess with any certainty the total number of breaches of the regulations which have occurred.

The figures for Penalty Notices and CRNs above also include proactive action by PSNI, as well as reports.

Decisions relating to the issuing of FPNs are an operational matter for the Chief Constable.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice whether she will fund (i) specialist domestic abuse counselling; and (ii) practical support for women in the criminal justice system.

(AQW 7235/17-22)

Mrs Long: Support for women who have experienced domestic abuse and who are at risk of offending or who have offended will be considered as part of the new strategy to support and challenge women and girls who come in contact with the justice system. As the strategy is in development, I cannot confirm the particular actions that will emerge at this time, however given the focus on prevention and diversion, where appropriate, the strategy will seek to support women in the community, building on the provision currently available for those who come in contact with the criminal justice system.

Criminal Justice Organisations such as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), and the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), offer victims of domestic abuse practical help through support agencies and refer, as appropriate, to voluntary partners such as Women's Aid, Nexus NI and statutory agencies such as Social Services. Victims of crime are also referred to and supported by Victim Support.

From April 2020, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, when an initial crime of domestic abuse has occurred, PSNI operate a call back system whereby all victims of domestic abuse are called back to reassure the victim. This provides an opportunity for a victim to receive support, be referred to partner agencies, to make further disclosures, provide additional evidence or information regarding matters under investigation and for police to investigate new reports.

PBNI work closely with Victim Support, who assist their service users who are subject to an Enhanced Combination Order. This, along with other partnerships to provide counselling and support for women, is instrumental in supporting the supervision and management of women in the community.

With regards to women in prison who have experienced abuse, support is provided under the resettlement pathways, specifically Pathway 8 Supporting offenders who have been abused, raped or experienced domestic violence, and where appropriate, Pathway 9 Supporting offenders who have been involved in prostitution and the sex industry. They can also avail of support from a NIPS Women's Safety Worker (a post specifically created last year to provide support to women in custody who have been victims of domestic or sexual violence) and counselling services from Women's Aid. You may also wish to note that women who have been victims of domestic violence and perpetrated other violence have the opportunity to participate in the 'Beyond Violence' programme.

Other work being taken forward that will assist those affected by domestic abuse includes progressing legislation to provide for a new domestic abuse offence to capture patterns of controlling and coercive behaviour against a partner, former partner or family member. I also intend to introduce a new advocacy support service, to support victims of domestic and sexual abuse as they go through the criminal justice system.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cost to her Department of renting private buildings in town and city centres, in each year since 2015.

(AQW 7262/17-22)

Mrs Long: The costs to my Department through the payment of rent and service charges to private landlords over the five full financial years from 1st April 2015 is set out in the table overleaf.

2015/16 £k	2016/17 £k	2017/18 £k	2018/19 £k	2019/20 £k	Totals £k	
264.2	121.1	178.2	182.3	138.9	884.7	Core Dept
494.3	433.3	392.1	376.7	376.8	2,073.2	Youth Justice Agency
544.8	548.1	542.4	596.0	616.6	2,847.9	Probation Board NI
110.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	110.6	NI Courts & Tribunals Service
452.6	439.2	518.8	568.1	564.5	2,543.2	Legal Services Agency NI
282.0	282.0	282.0	282.0	282.0	1,410.0	Office of the Police Ombudsman
362.3	398.7	380.1	378.2	378.2	1,897.5	NI Policing Board
2,510.8	2,222.4	2,293.6	2,383.3	2,357.0	11,767.1	Totals

Table 1. Rental and service charge costs paid to private landlords in respect of DoJ-occupied buildings.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice why no court building in Northern Ireland is suitable to deal with jury trials involving more than one defendant.

(AQW 7278/17-22)

Mrs Long: NICTS has completed a programme of risk assessments to make court and tribunal buildings COVID safe and secure for staff, judiciary and court users. Jury trials resumed at Laganside Courts, Belfast on 19 August 2020. To facilitate Covid Secure Jury trials, significant construction and digital upgrade works have been progressed at an accelerated pace at Laganside and five regional venues. By early October, NICTS will have restored 72% of its pre Covid capacity for Jury trials.

The public health requirements around social distancing create obvious constraints for fully physical hearings, and this particularly applies to the defendant dock areas. However, while it is true that to date, only jury trials with a single defendant have resumed, we have already identified courtrooms in which more than one defendant could be tried in the dock, while maintaining social distancing. Additionally, we are working with our partners in the Prisoner Escorting and Court Custody Service (PECCS), to develop safe working practices around trying multiple defendants who are in custody, on bail, or a combination of both.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what is the current number of prisoners held at HMP Magilligan.
(AQW 7338/17-22)

Mrs Long: At 08.00 hours on 24 September 2020 there were 401 prisoners held at HMP Magilligan.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice how many children and young people in the juvenile justice system have been convicted of a non-violent offence in the last five years.

(AQW 7383/17-22)

Mrs Long: Departmental datasets do not contain a specific marker in relation to violent or non-violent offences. Therefore, information on the numbers of young people, aged 10 – 17, who received a conviction at court, in the years 2015 – 2019, the most recent year for which information is available, in relation to the category of the main offence at conviction, has been provided in response to this question.

Convictions at courts, where the defendant was aged under 18 by category of main offence, 2015 – 2019

Offence category	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Violence Against the Person	297	227	253	157	206
Sexual	#	#	4	11	11
Robbery	14	*	4	*	*
Theft	158	92	122	112	92
Burglary	55	44	43	29	25
Criminal Damage & Arson	233	174	209	210	167
Drugs	41	27	53	49	53
Possession of Weapons	20	19	13	13	15
Public Order	119	70	89	49	50
Motoring	111	102	100	76	77
Fraud	*	-	-	#	*
Miscellaneous	80	58	79	47	22
Total	1,136	823	969	759	722

Notes:

- 1 Figures relate to initial disposal at court. Results of appeals are not included.
- 2 Figures relate to defendants aged under 18 at time the case was dealt with in court.
- 3 Figures for offence categories relate to cases where the principal offence was in the category specified.
- 4 Figures relate to cases prosecuted by PPS on behalf of PSNI, PBNI, NCA, Airport Constabulary, or Harbour Police.
- 5 ‘*’ means a figure of 3 or less has been treated under rules of disclosure.
- 6 ‘#’ means a figure greater than 3 has been treated to prevent disclosure of a small number elsewhere.

As at 24th September 2020, there were 9 children in custody at Woodlands JJC, all of whom were on remand rather than serving a sentence on conviction.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what is the current number of prisoners held at HMP Maghaberry.
(AQW 7406/17-22)

Mrs Long: On Thursday at 08.00 hours on 24th September 2020 there were 962 prisoners held at Maghaberry Prison.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice whether she has engaged with the Murray and Dorian families in relation to their campaign, following their request for engagement and a meeting.

(AQW 7416/17-22)

Mrs Long: Unfortunately my meeting with the families of Charlotte Murray and Lisa Dorrian, planned for earlier this year, had to be cancelled because of Covid restrictions.

More recently, I met briefly and informally with the families and am having a more structured and detailed meeting with them later this month.

My officials met with both families on 29 September as an early part of the work I have commissioned to help me to determine the best way forward to address the families' concerns that the disclosure of victim's remains should be directly linked to the release on parole, not only of Charlotte's murderer, but of all offenders who commit similar offences.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Justice how many prosecutions (i) have taken place in the last 6 months; and (ii) are pending, with regards to assaults of any category on shop staff because they have asked a customer to wear a face covering in line with COVID-19 regulations and guidelines.

(AQW 7437/17-22)

Mrs Long: There is no specific offence in relation to assault on retail staff in relation to the requirement to wear face coverings under COVID-19 regulations and guidelines. Such offences may be recorded under general 'Assault' offence descriptions.

To identify cases which related to assault on retail staff in relation to the requirement to wear face coverings under COVID-19 regulations and guidelines would require a manual search of case records for assault offences, for which there were 1,150 prosecutions at courts since the start of April 2020. We estimate that to locate, retrieve and extract any information that might be relevant to your request would involve work of more than the appropriate limit.

The appropriate limit is specified in regulations and for central government is set at £700. It is estimated that to search systems manually for relevant information to identify whether offences for which a conviction was handed down for theft, it will take one member of staff approximately five minutes per case, giving a total of over 95 hours work. At a cost of £25 per hour, this equates to over £2,375 which is higher than the appropriate limit.

Note: The figures provided in relation to the number of cases are provisional.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Justice whether she has made any assessment of the cost to the public purse of any potential claims arising from the convictions of 15 sex offenders being set aside.

(AQW 7503/17-22)

Mrs Long: On 22 September the Public Prosecution Service announced that the convictions of 15 individuals for certain sexual offences prosecuted between 2009 and 2017 are to be set aside as a result of an historical legislative error which caused them to be invalid.

The 15 convictions, which resulted in penalties ranging from a £250 fine to one custodial sentence, are to be rescinded.

As a consequence, any of the offenders can seek the return of fines and compensation ordered to be paid to victims and may use the courts to seek compensation for their convictions.

My Department will robustly resist any such compensation claims and will indemnify victims from returning any compensation awarded.

I fully appreciate the impact on victims of hearing that the convictions of those who committed these offences against them are to be set aside. It is possible that some may consider that compensation is warranted if they have suffered additional trauma and distress. As each case will be determined on its merits it is not possible to assess the cost to the Department of any such claims.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Justice what action has been taken to address the mental and physical health needs of prisoners currently on hunger strike at HMP Maghaberry.

(AQW 7528/17-22)

Mrs Long: All prisoners who are refusing prison meals will be seen by a nurse from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust on a daily basis. If necessary they will make a referral for any other medical interventions required.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Justice what is her assessment of the recent Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey, which shows more respondents disagreed more than they agreed with the statement 'we have a safe community where we respect the law, and each other'.

(AQW 7534/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBAS) is a school based survey commissioned approximately every 3 years. It covers a range of topics relevant to young people, with questions being commissioned by a number of different departments for use in a number of reports.

The Executive Office (TEO) commissioned questions within the above survey to gauge opinion on the Programme for Government Outcomes, with TEO Headline Report "Our Young People: Perceptions of the Outcomes Framework 2019" being published on 4 September.

Surveys are an important way to gauge opinion from all different kinds of groups of people over a set period of time. It is disappointing to note on this occasion, within the above TEO report, there is a two percentage points difference between those young people who agreed and strongly agreed (32%) with Outcome 7 compared to those who disagreed and strongly disagreed (34%).

In contrast, it is important to note page 17 of the YPBAS Key Findings Report published on 22 September which states, under the Personal Safety section, that practically all young people (95%) feel safe in the area in which they live.

The most common issues that were cited by young people in the above Key Findings Report as problems in their area were people being rowdy or drunk in public places and people using or dealing in drugs (both 21%), vandalism, graffiti or deliberate damage to property (19%) and people being insulted, pestered or intimidated in the street (10%).

There are many sources which my Department uses to gauge opinion on generally from both young people and adults. The YPBAS survey is one of a number of important sources taken into account, along with other surveys and statistics, such as the NI Safe Community Survey, the Life and Times and the Young Life and Times Surveys.

I am committed to make all people, including young people, feel safer in their communities where they respect the law and each other, and my Department will continue to work to ensure that all concerns, including those from survey information, are taken into account when progressing programmes of work.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice, following the protest by dissident republicans at HMP Maghaberry, what steps are being taken to secure the perimeter of the prison to ensure future protests cannot take place on prison grounds given that a decision was made to facilitate the protest on the property.

(AQW 7677/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Prison Service planned carefully, and engaged with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to ensure that this protest would not impact upon the delivery of safe, decent and secure custody within Maghaberry Prison.

Through this planning Maghaberry Prison continued to operate as normal with the same weekend regime offered to all prisoners, as would normally be the case.

The secure perimeter of the prison was unaffected by the protest and there is no need to introduce further measures in this respect. The management of the protest outside the gates of Maghaberry is an operational matter for the PSNI.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice to detail how 15 sex offenders have had their convictions rescinded.

(AQW 7686/17-22)

Mrs Long: On 22 September the Public Prosecution Service announced that the convictions of 15 individuals for certain sexual offences prosecuted between 2009 and 2017 are to be set aside as a result of an historical legislative error which caused them to be invalid.

The individuals whose convictions are being set aside were tried and convicted in the Magistrates Courts. However, a technical change in the law, made in error and prior to the devolution of justice, meant that a small number of sexual offences could only be prosecuted in the higher Crown Court.

The removal of certain sexual offences from a Schedule to the Magistrates Court (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, by the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, and, earlier legislation in 2003, meant the Magistrates Court lost the legal power to try these cases.

The sexual offences are:

- indecent assault on a female, contrary to section 52 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861;
- indecent assault on a male, contrary to section 62 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861; and
- unlawful carnal knowledge, contrary to section 5(1) of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885.

The Public Prosecution Service will shortly be making an application to the Courts to have the convictions for these offences rescinded.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the announcement that the convictions of 15 people prosecuted in the Magistrates' Court for a sexual offence between 2009 and 2017 have been set aside as a result of legislative error which caused them to be invalid, what discussions her Department has had with the Public Prosecution Service to ensure that this does not happen again.

(AQW 7699/17-22)

Mrs Long: On 22 September the Public Prosecution Service announced that the convictions of 15 individuals for certain sexual offences prosecuted between 2009 and 2017 are to be set aside as a result of an historical legislative error which caused them to be invalid.

I spoke to the Director of Public Prosecutions earlier this month and our immediate focus was on ensuring that the victims of the error were appropriately informed and supported. He assured me that steps were taken to ensure that no further cases related to this error were progressed and I am confident that no further historical cases will be inappropriately tried summarily as a consequence of the absence of a saving clause in the 2008 legislation.

My officials have also had regular meetings with colleagues in the PPS in 2020 to understand what had gone wrong regarding the legislative error and to assist the PPS in managing its consequences. Further meetings will take place in the coming months to take stock and to consider what actions are necessary to ensure that the lessons learnt from the current situation are applied going forward.

As part of this approach, I have tasked a senior lawyer in the Department to develop a quality assurance check mechanism which can be built into all processes involved both in developing policy and in drafting provisions for future legislation. This will include building a robust mechanism to ensure that Department and criminal justice partners discuss the implications of any proposed new legislation on their procedures and decision making, and on the application of the legislation in the courts.

The Public Prosecution Service is aware that this work is going forward and will be a part of it.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's response to the Public Prosecution Service's decision to rescind sexual convictions relating to fifteen individuals, including (i) what actions she will take to investigate this failure; (ii) hold to account those responsible; and (iii) repair confidence in the administration of Justice in Northern Ireland. **(AQW 7782/17-22)**

Mrs Long: On 22 September 2020 the Public Prosecution Service announced that the convictions of 15 individuals for certain sexual offences prosecuted between 2009 and 2017 are to be set aside as a result of an historical legislative error which caused them to be invalid.

The Department investigated fully what led to this and I set out clearly in my Statement to the Assembly on 28 September 2020 what the error was. No saving clause was inserted when the following repealed offences were removed from Schedule 2 to the Magistrates Court (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. The offences were:

- indecent assault on a female, contrary to section 52 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861
- indecent assault on a male, contrary to section 62 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861: and
- unlawful carnal knowledge, contrary to section 5(1) of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1882

The absence of a saving provision meant that the Magistrates Court no longer had the legal power to try these cases.

My statement also set out clearly the steps taken by the Public Prosecution Service and my Department to clearly identify the full implications of this error and, once these were known and I had been advised by the Director of the Public Prosecution Service of his intention to apply to have the convictions rescinded, my priority was to ensure that the victims of these offences were protected as much as possible from further distress.

The error occurred many years ago prior to the devolution of criminal justice matters when the process of introducing legislation did not provide the same opportunities for detailed scrutiny that, thankfully, elected members now give to legislation laid in the Assembly.

The development of legislation is a process involving many stages, during which many people are involved. In this case it is clear that no-one, at any stage, identified the consequences of the changes made to the 1981 Order. Given the passage of time and the nature of the error, the issue of apportioning blame is neither desirable, practicable nor possible.

The cases which subsequently went to the Magistrates court in error were sent there in good faith and none of those involved recognised that a problem existed.

Having been assured that victims are being supported through these difficult times and that there are no further cases arising from this error, my focus is on ensuring something like this does not happen again.

It is possible that some further historic cases, predating the 2008 Order but affected by the legislative error, could arise and could only be tried in the Crown Court. Noting that some could potentially be more suitable for the Magistrates Court, my Department has instructed the Office of Legislative Counsel to prepare a clause in the forthcoming Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill to reinstate the relevant sexual offences into Schedule 2 of the 1981 Order, where the offending conduct has occurred before 2 February 2009 - the date of commencement of the 2008 Order.

I have also asked one of the Department's senior lawyers to prepare an analysis of the processes which may have contributed to the error and to develop a quality assurance check mechanism. This will be built into our policy and bill development processes covering future legislation. I will provide that analysis to the Justice Committee when it has been concluded.

I trust that these actions will reassure the public that this issue is being taken seriously and positive steps are being taken to resolve the problem and ensure that procedures are put in place to prevent such a situation recurring.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what discussions she has had with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland regarding allegations by Fianna Fáil TD Seán Haughey that the Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA between 1969 and 1972

was a Garda agent; and whether she will support calls for a full scale public inquiry into the role played by Dublin in the Troubles.

(AQW 7801/17-22)

Mrs Long: I have not had any discussions with the Minister for Justice in the Department of Justice and Equality about the allegations made by Seán Haughey TD.

As the calls for a public inquiry do not relate to this jurisdiction, it would be wholly inappropriate for me to enter into a debate about this issue in my capacity as Minister of Justice for Northern Ireland.

Department for the Economy

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she has agreed to the closure of HMS Caroline to the public; and (ii) whether her Department has indicated to the Museum of the Royal Navy that the Department is unwilling to support this vital historic landmark and its continuance in Belfast.

(AQW 5744/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):

- (i) HMS Caroline (HMSC) has been closed to the public, due to the Covid-19 crisis, since 17th March 2020 but I have agreed to extend this temporary closure until 31st December 2020.

Following an agreement between my Department and the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN), HMSC fully opened as a maritime heritage visitor attraction in Belfast in April 2018, having first opened on 31st May 2016 for a period to commemorate the centenary of the Battle of Jutland. HMSC has played a very important part in our maritime history and I fully recognise the cultural importance of the attraction.

Visitor numbers are key to the sustainability of this attraction, which is reliant on ticket sales and spend at the café or shop. However, visitor numbers have been disappointing to date, resulting in operational deficits. The Department has

been concerned about these deficits for some time and has been working closely with NMRN, who also act as operators, to attempt to make the attraction more profitable, reduce deficits and ensure greater value for the use of public funds. During 2018/19, the NMRN first informed the Department of these substantial operational deficits, dating back to 2015/16. This was unexpected as detailed business cases had estimated that any operational deficit would likely not occur until Year 9 (2022/23) of the project. We are still in the process of fully verifying and quantifying the exact extent of this deficit. My Department has appointed, at our own expense, independent consultants to undertake a review of this deficit and to report on the eligibility, reasonableness, accuracy and completeness of the amounts claimed by NMRN, ensuring there is no duplication with other grants received. This report has now been finalised and the findings are being discussed with NMRN. However, to help with cash-flow issues during the Covid-19 crisis, my Department has already taken the unusual step of making a very substantial advance part payment to NMRN. Once the issues highlighted within the report have been addressed, any outstanding amount of claim will be paid in line with our legal liabilities.

- (ii) My Department has not indicated to NMRN that it is no longer willing to support this historic landmark and its continuance in Belfast. I am committed to exploring all feasible options for retaining the Ship in Belfast. This period of temporary closure will be used to undertake a thorough review of the attraction, reappraise the original business cases and identify efficient and cost effective options for moving forward. Consultants have now been appointed to take forward this work and have already undertaken an extensive series of discussions with the relevant stakeholders and have begun to shortlist potential options. We will continue to work closely with NMRN and other key stakeholders, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, during the period of temporary closure and will keep them engaged and informed throughout the process. We will also take into account how the tourism sector in Northern Ireland is likely to recover in the short, medium and longer term.

NMRN also serve as operators of the attraction and we had a legal agreement with them to cover this service, which expired on 30th June 2020. My Department requested an extension to this Agreement but NMRN took the decision not to renew this unless we would agree a new funding model which absolved them of financial risk. NMRN confirmed its intention to my Department on 10th June 2020 and this did not afford officials sufficient time to formulate a new funding model, redraft a new operating agreement or to procure a new operator of the attraction. Therefore, following discussions between officials and NMRN, I agreed that the attraction will remain closed until 31st December 2020.

The Department has advised NMRN that we will meet agreed costs associated with this period of temporary closure. This will include the temporary layoff costs for all HMSC staff, following the cessation of the Job Retention Scheme on 31st October 2020. This will avoid redundancies and means that NMRN will be able to retain the staff until the end of the period of temporary closure. We will use this period of temporary closure to undertake the review of the attraction, reappraise the original business cases and identify efficient and cost effective options for moving forward. We will keep NMRN fully informed and engaged throughout this process. We will also take into account how the tourism sector in Northern Ireland is likely to recover in the short, medium and longer term.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) why she commissioned a £75,000 research project into the potential economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production in Northern Ireland; (ii) for her assessment of whether this is congruent with the New Decade, New Approach commitment to tackling climate change; and (iii) whether she plans to commission a similar research project into (a) geothermal; (b) hydro; and (c) wave energy.
(AQW 6808/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The Department for the Economy is seeking to commission independent research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production to ensure that there is sufficient knowledge of these issues and the interaction between them to inform the formulation of evidence-based future petroleum licensing policy options.
- (ii) The research is congruent with the New Decade, New Approach strategic priority of tackling climate change head on. In addition, it considers the potential impact of the proposed objectives contained in the 2019 public discussion document on an Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland.

To address the uncertainties around the effect of climate change policies, the Research Project will consider the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production for a number of scenarios, including a low carbon economy that is seeking to meet net zero commitments.

- (iii) In addition to the planned independent research, the Department is developing a new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland that will set the strategic direction for a wide range of issues across the energy sector including the future growth of renewable energy, within the context of the UK Government's legislative target of net zero carbon by 2050. There is a substantial work programme ongoing to analyse the Energy Strategy Call for Evidence responses and to gather further evidence where gaps have been identified.
 - (a) In terms of geothermal research, the Department is supporting a proposal, under development, to explore and demonstrate resources of shallow and deep geothermal heat in Northern Ireland.
 - (b) Currently no specific research has been commissioned on hydro-electricity although policy options under development are looking at the future renewable electricity mix more broadly.
 - (c) As regards wave and tidal power; the Department co-funds the Centre for Advanced and Sustainable Energy at QUB, where wave and tidal research is being carried out.

The research into alternative energy will contribute towards the development of robust Energy policy options that will be the subject of a public consultation by the end of March 2021. Following the consultation, and subject to securing Executive approval, it is intended to have the final Strategy in place by November 2021.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the underspend for renewable energies at the end of financial year 2019/20.
(AQW 7019/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In the financial year 2019-20, expenditure relating to the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme totalled £6.7million. Available Annually Managed Expenditure (AME) budget to meet these costs was £28.9 million. AME that was not drawn down in this financial year therefore amounted to £22.2million.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy for a breakdown of funding provided by Invest NI to help businesses to re-purpose in order to manufacture personal protective equipment.
(AQW 7047/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Supporting businesses to respond to the new business environment following COVID-19 is a top priority for me, my Department and for Invest Northern Ireland. Indeed, I recently announced two specific COVID-19 programmes: a new £1million Digital Selling Capability Grant to help retailers and wholesalers generate business online; and a £5million Equity Investment Fund targeted at early stage and seed stage SMEs.

Invest NI operates a range of support schemes which are being used to support businesses to repurpose to manufacture PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) – including Grant for R&D, Innovation Vouchers, supply chain and capital investment support. Due to this mix of schemes, and the fact that projects may not be exclusively focussed on PPE, it is not possible to readily extract data on the specific amount of assistance offered solely for repurposing.

Whilst the provision of financial support is critical to helping business adjust to the new market environment, it cannot be overstated how important it is to ensure that business has access to the right practical advice and guidance to inform their decision-making. Invest NI has provided advice and guidance to businesses on PPE requirement and specifications, advising on PPE certification requirements, and the strategic sourcing of raw materials that are key in helping business rise to the PPE challenge. In addition, and in anticipation that the demand for PPE would increase as companies returned to work, Invest NI supported the development of a COVID-19 supplies page on www.buysupplyni.com. This has allowed companies to register their products to enable other businesses to source PPE and materials to assist with social distancing.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for the Economy what assurance she can give that the Renewable Heat Incentive algorithm used to calculate the extant rebate tariff assures a 12 per cent return based upon cost of capital.

(AQW 7102/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The 2019 tariff was designed to deliver a 12% rate of return for the typical installation on a prospective basis, with costs in line with the analysis carried out by industry experts Ricardo. The tariff levels are based on analysis of the additional capital costs of installing a biomass boiler compared to an equivalent fossil fuel boiler and also cover the difference in operating costs between renewable heating technology and the fossil fuel alternative.

Full details on the calculation of the tariffs, including the underlying evidence base and the methodology for achieving a typical 12% rate of return going forward are contained in the "NIRHI Biomass Tariff Review Final Report" which has been published at:

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/consultations/future-northern-ireland-non-domestic-renewable-heat-incentive-scheme> (Item 9)

In bringing forward the 2019 tariffs, DfE committed to keeping tariffs under review and to revising them if underlying conditions merited it. Cornwall Insight was engaged to carry out a further independent review of the medium biomass tariffs. Cornwall proposed an increase in the medium biomass tariffs to ensure the 12% return continues to be reflected in the tariff, as underlying variable operating costs have changed since the 2019 tariffs. My Department launched a consultation on the implementation of Cornwall's findings which closed on 26 May 2020.

The Cornwall recommendations, participants' views and evidence provided via the consultation and analysis of recent fuel price movements are being considered as part of the ongoing work towards scheme closure in line with the commitment detailed in the New Decade, New Approach deal.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for the Economy whether the EU Commission approved RHI on the basis of a 12% return, and whether this was based upon cost of capital, rate of return or internal rate of return.

(AQW 7103/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: State aid approval for the Northern Ireland Non-domestic RHI Scheme was granted by the EU Commission in June 2012. Paragraphs 33 and 63 of the approval set out the basis for the 12% return. A copy of the approval is available on the Commission's website at the following link:

https://ec.europa.eu/competition/state_aid/cases/244651/244651_1375577_58_1.pdf

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will bring forward legislation that would create a statutory right to disconnect for workers.

(AQW 7199/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are currently Regulations in place safeguarding working time limits in Northern Ireland.

The Working Time Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 make a positive contribution to our employment relations framework, laying down minimum conditions relating to weekly working time, rest entitlements and annual leave, and making special provision for working hours and health assessment in relation to night workers.

Under the Working Time Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016, a worker is entitled to an uninterrupted rest period of 11 hours between each working day and one uninterrupted weekly rest period of not less than 24 hours in each seven-day period.

The weekly rest period can be taken as either two periods of at least 24 hours in each 14-day period or one uninterrupted period of no less than 48 hours in each 14-day period.

I am aware of the Financial Services Union campaign to disconnect workers to offset the downsides of homeworking, and the results of the survey with homeworking staff conducted between April and May 2020. I realise that these are difficult times and I wholly sympathise with workers who feel under stress and increased pressure.

I believe, however, that the current legislation provides sufficient protections and appropriate enforcement arrangements and, as such, have no plans at present to amend current working time legislation for Northern Ireland.

In the immediate term, my Department's resources will be focused on Northern Ireland's economic recovery. I am, however, always open to working with Executive Colleagues, the Assembly and stakeholders regarding wider plans for ensuring our employment legislation framework meets the needs of our regional economy.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider providing additional funding and support for new start-ups in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7242/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I recognise the importance of business start-ups in driving the growth of our economy. Following Local Government reform in 2015, responsibility for local business start-ups, social enterprises and start-ups by under-represented groups passed from Invest NI to the 11 Councils.

There are a number of support programmes already in place for this important part of our economy. The 11-Council NI Business Start-Up Programme, branded as 'Go for It', is supported by Invest NI. This programme is part-funded through the

Local Economic Development (LED) Measure of the European Regional Development Fund, with match funding provided by Invest NI and Councils. Over 3½ years until March 2021, this programme will support approximately 15,000 participants to start their own businesses. Recently the 11 Councils secured additional LED Measure and Invest NI funding for a subsequent programme, will run from April 2021 until March 2023 and which will aim to support a further c6,000 individuals to start their own businesses.

In addition, the LED Measure and Invest NI have also funded a further 36 programmes of support with Councils. These programmes are offering direct support to approximately 11,000 locally focussed businesses through a number of interventions such as mentoring and workshops to help them grow and become more competitive.

Invest NI continues to support the start-up ecosystem through initiatives including its Propel pre-accelerator Programme delivered by IGNITE. The Programme is currently delivered virtually, offering entrepreneurs workshops, tutorials, mentoring, financial support and access to investment.

Invest NI also recently launched the Covid-19 Digital Selling Capability Grant and the Covid-19 Equity Investment Fund, which are available to all eligible NI companies.

Finally, Invest NI's Innovation Voucher Scheme offers a business up to £5,000 to work with a knowledge provider. The scheme is particularly helpful to small businesses seeking to innovate and grow.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) how many training organisations access funding for skills escalation and training opportunities in Foyle; and (ii) the total funding allocated by her Department for these agencies for training.

(AQW 7246/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

(i) The Department's Apprenticeship and Youth Training programmes are delivered by a network of Further Education Colleges, universities and contracted non-statutory training providers which offer access to all communities across Northern Ireland.

Apprenticeships

There are four organisations delivering Apprenticeship Programmes in Foyle.

Youth Training

There are four organisations delivering the Training for Success programme in Foyle.

European Social Fund

There are eight training organisations which primarily operate in Foyle.

Peace4Youth

Five organisations located in Foyle are delivering the Peace4Youth programme for young people aged 14-24 is delivered to both Foyle and the surrounding areas, including on a cross-border basis.

In addition, Further Education Colleges also provide training provision in the Foyle Area.

(ii) The Department's Apprenticeship and Youth Training funding is not allocated on a geographical basis. It should be noted that participants living outside Foyle may avail of provision offered by organisations located in Foyle. Equally, other organisations located outside Foyle may provide services to participants living in Foyle.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the cost to her Department of renting private buildings in town and city centres, in each year since 2015.

(AQW 7263/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy was established in May 2016. The cost to this Department and its ALB's of renting private buildings in towns and city centres in each year since it was established was as follows:

2016/2017 £000's	2017/2018 £000's	2018/2019 £000's	2019/2020 £000's
459	467	439	505

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has submitted any bids to the Department of Finance to provide additional support for those who have not been eligible for any other government assistance, specifically (i) the self-employed; (ii) micro-businesses; and (iii) sole traders.

(AQW 7320/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 6917/17-22.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what discussions she has had with the UK Government about the adoption of the Kickstart scheme in Northern Ireland; and (ii) whether she will be announcing the introduction of the Kickstart scheme for businesses in Northern Ireland to provide temporary work placements for 16-24-year-olds.

(AQW 7326/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Many thanks for your question which the Department for the Economy has passed to my Department to respond to.

On 8th July 2020, the British Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced the Kickstart Scheme. Officials from the Department for Work and Pensions were in contact with my Departmental officials that same day to request a meeting to discuss the measures outlined.

This meeting took place on 16th July 2020, with a second meeting on 30th July 2020.

My Department intends to have a Scheme up and running in November 2020 which meets the needs of people here.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what progress her Department has made on a future Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland; and (ii) for her assessment of whether the Department for the Economy is fit for purpose and suitably qualified to conduct this strategic review.

(AQW 7356/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) My Department has carried out a call for evidence to inform a new Energy Strategy, which closed in April 2020 and received 161 responses. Five workshops were held across Northern Ireland to facilitate engagement with key stakeholders. A summary report on the call for evidence along with a report from the workshops were published in June 2020. A detailed timeline for the production of an energy strategy has been published, and is supported by monthly updates outlining progress on key themes being considered within it, with four having been published to date. All these reports are available on my Department's website at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/energy/energy-strategy>.

We have established five working groups to assist in developing policy options on the key themes of consumers, energy efficiency, heat, power and transport. These groups have more than 70 representatives from over 30 different organisations across central and local government, the Utility Regulator, energy industry and other stakeholders. My Department has also established a Government Stakeholders Group to provide leadership and coordination on energy-related matters across central and local government. We have also almost completed the development of an Energy Transition Model to test policy options in different future energy scenarios and pathways to estimate the impact on energy demand for NI, carbon emissions and costs. This substantial work programme will conclude with an options paper on the Energy Strategy for consultation by the end of March 2021.

- (ii) The development of an Energy Strategy is a collaborative approach which will deliver an Executive strategy, reflecting the fact that energy policy responsibilities are spread across five different departments. As highlighted, this work involves substantial input from across government, the energy industry and wider stakeholders on policy options. This input is being supported by extensive research and modelling. An Expert Panel on the Future of Energy has also been established to advise on and provide external challenge to the development of policy options.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what actions she will take to address issues noted in the NI Audit Office Report on Invest NI, which stated that Invest NI's £2.5 million loan to Wrights Group was awarded before being given formal approval being received from the European Commission.

(AQW 7379/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I do not believe any action is required, for the following reasons:

- Given the nature and urgency of rescue aid it is not uncommon that it is awarded prior to formal approval by the EU Commission. In the case of the Wrights Group, the cash flow pressures were such that funding was urgently required to assist the company to continue to trade, with the ultimate aim of seeking a new buyer that could fund the business. Invest NI notified the aid to the European Commission at the earliest opportunity and engaged with the Commission throughout the process.
- During this engagement, the Commission advised that it was understood that there are times that rescue aid has to be paid out before a decision i.e. for urgent, understandable reasons to avoid a greater harm, but that ultimately this was a decision for the Northern Ireland authorities. The Commission also asked that Invest NI inform them if it became necessary to pay the aid prior to approval. This was done and the Commission was sighted on the entire process throughout. Invest NI also kept the Department for the Economy and the Department of Finance advised on this matter.
- On 17 September 2019, the Commission confirmed that it had no objections to the rescue aid loan to the Wrights Group, as the loan was considered to be compatible with the internal market.
- In October 2019, the Wrights Administrators sold the bulk of the business assets to Bamford Bus Company Ltd, which now employs c400 staff.
- £1.5m of the £2.5m loan has already been repaid and the Administrators have advised that it is expected that the remainder of the loan will be repaid from asset realisations.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her Department's (i) research; and (ii) review of petroleum licencing.

(AQW 7387/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- 1 The Department is currently working through the final stages of the procurement exercise for the research into the impacts of petroleum development in Northern Ireland.
- 2 It is intended that the findings of the research will be used to enable the development of robust, evidence based policy options and to inform meaningful public consultation on a proposed way forward. Following the policy development and consultation process, decisions on a future petroleum policy, as well as the decisions on whether or not to grant Petroleum Licence applications PLA1/16 and PLA2/16, will be made by the Executive.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy when she will announce a financial support scheme for those sole traders, recently self-employed and businesses who have had no COVID-19-related financial support since the outbreak of the pandemic.

(AQW 7395/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 6917/17-22.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will pause the awarding of a contract for research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production to allow for a full investigation and understanding of issues and implications of the research to take place.

(AQW 7428/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is currently undertaking a review of the petroleum licencing regime in Northern Ireland. To inform that review, my Department plans to commission research which will provide the Department with a detailed assessment of the economic, environmental and social impacts of onshore oil and gas exploration and development in Northern Ireland. The Department is currently working through the final stages of the procurement exercise and expects to be in position to provide an update to bidders in due course.

As the outcome of this research will also be used to help inform the future petroleum licencing regime that we adopt in Northern Ireland and include the consideration of many of the issues raised by respondents to the consultations for the petroleum licence applications PLA1/16 and PLA2/16, it is important that this research is started as soon as possible.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what stage of development the business case to expand Magee to 10,000 students is currently at; and (ii) when it will be sent to Department of Finance.

(AQW 7475/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Ulster University confirmed in correspondence to my Department in September 2019, that it remained committed to securing expansion of its Magee campus, however confirmed that the business case required updating prior to any consideration by the Department or Executive.

To date my Department has not received a further proposal for consideration, however I am committed to working with the University around the consideration of any expansion proposals that it develops.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number and nature of meetings her officials have had with other Departments to discuss the expansion of Magee College to 10,000 students.

(AQW 7476/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There have been no meetings held between my Departmental Officials and other Government Departments to discuss the potential expansion of Ulster University's Magee College to 10,000 students.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number and nature of meetings she has had with her executive colleagues to discuss and plan for the expansion of Magee College to 10,000 students.

(AQW 7477/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have not held any meetings with my executive colleagues to discuss the potential expansion of Ulster University's Magee College to 10,000 students.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for the Economy how many meetings she or her officials have had with Ulster University to progress the expansion of Magee College to 10,000 students.

(AQW 7478/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There have been no meetings held between myself or my Departmental Officials and Ulster University to progress the potential expansion of Magee College.

However, following a request by the DfE Permanent Secretary for an update on the Ulster University's proposals for Magee, the University confirmed in correspondence to my Department in September 2019, that it remained committed to securing expansion of its Magee campus, and at the same time confirmed that the business case required updating prior to any consideration by the Department or Executive.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy how she will protect our food and produce industries that have an all island market, after the end of the transition period.

(AQW 7550/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is vital that our local industries, including those in the food and produce sector, are protected and able to continue to trade freely and embrace growth opportunities in all markets whether that be in the UK, Republic of Ireland or farther afield.

How best to protect NI businesses at the end of the transition period will of course depend on the issue at hand, and will likely require cooperation between a range of interested bodies. To that end I will continue to engage with local businesses to understand their needs and ensure they are able to avail of support to grow their exports regardless of destination.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will increase the levels of student support for post graduates to match the inflationary increases in student fees.

(AQW 7559/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is undertaking a review of the postgraduate funding available to NI domiciled students, which will consider the changes in the postgraduate market since the introduction of the Department's postgraduate student support funding in 2017. Consideration of changes to the level of fees charged and the level of support available will be central to the review, including whether student support levels should be increased in line with inflation. This review is currently at an early stage, meaning that consultation is yet to take place, but I hope to be in a position to consult in the coming months.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the work undertaken by her Department to realise the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to expand capacity at Magee Campus to 10,000 students.

(AQW 7563/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Ulster University confirmed in correspondence to my Department in September 2019, that it remained committed to securing expansion of its Magee campus, however confirmed that the business case required updating prior to any consideration by the Department or Executive.

I am committed to working with Ulster University around the consideration of any expansion proposals for Magee that it develops and await any further proposal it wishes to make in this regard. However, I recognise that considerable work needs to be done prior to any proposal being submitted for Executive consideration.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what renewable energy schemes are currently available in Northern Ireland; (ii) whether EU State Aid approval would be required for any new renewable energy schemes; and (iii) to detail any work undertaken by her Department around potential schemes and state aid requirements.

(AQW 7568/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) There are currently no renewable energy support schemes open to new applications in Northern Ireland. The need for new support mechanisms in the future is being considered as part of the process of developing a new Energy Strategy and I would refer the Member to the Energy Strategy area of the Department's website (<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/energy/energy-strategy>) where more information can be found.
- (ii) The Department's planning assumption is that EU State aid approval will be required for any measures that fall within the scope of Article 10 in the NI / Ireland Protocol. For any measures that fall outside of the Protocol, UK Government has said that there will be new flexibilities and that it will provide guidance before the end of the year.
- (iii) DfE State aid unit officials are engaging regularly with their colleagues in the BEIS subsidy control team and will provide clarity and guidance to aid providers in Northern Ireland as soon as this is available.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy the reason for the acting permanent secretary of the Department for the Economy receiving, according to the annual accounts of the Department, a pension benefit of £116,000 in the 2019/20 financial year, a sum that exceeded his annual salary for that year.

(AQW 7664/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The pension benefit data shown in the published Annual Report and Accounts of the Department for the Economy for the year ended 31 March 2020 has been provided by Civil Service Pensions.

The formula used to calculate the Pension Benefits is also disclosed in the accounts and it is this which drives the major increase especially in a year of promotion. Mike Brennan was acting Permanent Secretary from 01/12/2019 to 31/03/2020. This would explain the uplift in salary and subsequent uplift in pension benefits.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the plans for COVID-19 testing at universities.

(AQW 7683/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department is responsible for higher education policy in relation to teaching and research, as autonomous institutions, the universities are responsible for their own policies in relation to student health, including any plans for COVID-19 testing at campuses. However, I understand that the universities' plans for a safe return to campus were developed in accordance with the NI Executive's Pathway to Recovery Plan and in adherence with guidelines issued by the Public Health Agency.

My Department does not therefore hold this information, and you may wish to contact the universities directly for the information requested.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether her Department is aware that Fermanagh & Omagh District Council issued a consultation on fracking which contained a significant error; and (ii) what her Department is doing to make sure another error is not made.

(AQW 7700/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The Department has been made aware through correspondence we have received, that Fermanagh and Omagh District Council has cancelled and is re-running its consultation on the proposed changes to the Local Development Plan draft Plan Strategy. As this is the Council's consultation, it would not be appropriate for the Department to comment further.
- (ii) The error which you raise is an internal matter for Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and it not for the Department to involve itself in the Council's process.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy, following the positive cases associated with Queens University student accommodation, what work is being carried out with colleagues in the Executive, universities and student organisations to ensure measures are in place to limit the spread of COVID-19.

(AQW 7734/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department is responsible for higher education policy in relation to teaching and research, as autonomous institutions, the universities are ultimately responsible for their own policies in relation to student accommodation – this includes ensuring there are robust protocols in place to minimise the spread of Covid 19. My Department has no formal remit to intervene, although we have shared a range of relevant supporting guidance with the universities.

That said, my Ministerial colleagues in the Executive Office, along with the Chief Medical Officer, the Health Minister, the Public Health Agency and officials from my own Department, have been convening a weekly committee meeting with the universities. The purpose of the committee is to ensure a safe return to campus, and to address any emerging issues. Before this outbreak, Queen's had developed a range of contingency plans to address such eventualities, and these are now being enacted. I understand that Queen's has been working very closely with the Public Health Agency on these contingencies, and that they are fully in line with the Agency's guidelines.

My officials have already received assurances from Queen's that early intervention has taken place to ensure that any affected students are fully self-isolating, but are also provided with any necessary support to help them through this period.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 39205/11-15, the Strategic Environmental Assessment and the EU recommendations, what progress, if any, has been made on the implementation of the minimum principles recommended for the protection of health, climate and the environment where hydraulic fracturing is proposed.

(AQW 7754/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department recognises that under Directive 94/22/EC, the requirement to carry out a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is an integral and legislative requirement of policy development in relation to petroleum licensing.

The Review of Petroleum Licensing which my Department is currently undertaking will set the policy and strategic direction for future oil and gas extraction in Northern Ireland. This will be subject to an SEA in accordance with the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 (which transpose European Directive 2001/42/EC).

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy what measures her Department is taking to ensure the sustainability of Belfast International Airport.

(AQW 7852/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As I am sure you will appreciate, as a privately owned commercial entity, responsibility for ensuring the sustainability of Belfast International Airport rests with its Board and shareholders.

To clarify, I am not responsible for the funding of airports, that work is led by the Department of Finance and the Department for Infrastructure. My responsibility is with maintaining and enhancing Northern Ireland's air connectivity, both domestically

and internationally. In doing so, I fully acknowledge that civil aviation is a reserved matter for the UK Department for Transport (DfT).

I will continue to stress to the UK Government my view, and that of previous NI Ministers, which is that short haul Air Passenger Duty (APD) is an unfair tax, which has a particularly detrimental impact on NI passengers. Hence, I have written to the UK Government requesting a deferral of short haul APD, as part of a national solution to COVID-19.

I have established and lead a Tourism Recovery Steering Group in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes a sub-group tasked with identifying air and sea connectivity issues and developing policy solutions. As a direct result, I have successfully secured £2m to fund co-operative marketing. This will be delivered by Tourism Ireland, as part of the Executive's 2020-21 COVID-19 response, by March 2021.

I understand that DfT intend to publish their UK Aviation Recovery Plan in the autumn. My officials are engaged with them on their Regional Air Connectivity Review.

In May the Executive put in place measures, in respect of rate payments, to assist Northern Ireland businesses impacted by COVID-19. As a result, all three Northern Ireland airports are receiving 100% rates relief until 31 March 2021, which equates to £2.2m of support, in total.

I understand that the Department of Finance is continuing to engage with the airports and to monitor the sector as it recovers, including consideration of options for further support.

I fully recognise that air connectivity is essential to rebuilding Northern Ireland's economy and my Department is always willing to consider any requests for support from airports/airlines that deliver value for money and are compliant with EU State Aid regulations.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the support available for apprentices and employers through the apprenticeship recovery package.

(AQO 768/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On Friday 4th September I announced further detail of The Apprenticeship Recovery Package.

I have allocated over £14m to fund an Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result initiative, over £12m to fund an Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive initiative and £0.5m to fund an Apprenticeship Challenge Fund.

Payments are due to commence in November.

The Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result scheme will begin on 1 November 2020, when the UK Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ends. It offers up to £3,700 of support, per apprentice, to employers who return an apprentice from furlough and retain them until they have completed their apprenticeship.

The Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive initiative has been developed to encourage and support employers to create apprenticeship opportunities for both new apprentices and apprentices who have been made redundant. This scheme offers support of £3,000, to employers, for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.

The Apprenticeship Challenge Fund will launch in late September. This fund will support innovative approaches and new collaborations to increase apprenticeship opportunities in Northern Ireland. Successful applicants could receive one off awards of up to £50,000.

We have launched an advertising campaign and details of the scheme are now available on NIBusinessInfo.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the role of trade unions and their members in building a prosperous economy based on higher paid jobs.

(AQO 769/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: From my perspective I believe that our local Trade Unions have an important role to play in the development of our economy. Since the beginning of the pandemic their input has been incredibly important in keeping business going.

I want to see this collaboration continue as we look to the future, improving our economic performance and addressing social inequalities. By way of example, we have ensured that Trade Unions are represented on our recently formed skills advisory group. This group will provide advice to me and my officials on the development of our new skills strategy as well as the interventions necessary to support our future growth.

From a personal perspective I have always valued the advice and insight that I have gained from my engagements with Trade Union representatives across Northern Ireland. Most recently I met with representatives from the Aerospace sector which I found to be very useful and insightful. I, along with Ministers in Scotland and Wales, support Unite's call for a Taskforce to look at aerospace

I can assure the Member that my department and I will continue to engage with our Trade Union partners as we develop the work plan to rebuild our economy. This collaboration and engagement will be crucial if we are to succeed in our ambitions for Northern Ireland.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy what bids her Department has made to address regional imbalances as referenced in her Rebuilding a Stronger Economy strategy.

(AQO 770/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since publishing Rebuilding A Stronger Economy I have made a number of bids to support the rebuilding agenda.

Delivering benefits for all of Northern Ireland is integrated into the work of my department. The tourism and hospitality industry, for example, supports jobs across Northern Ireland, in cities and towns as well as in rural and coastal communities. I have submitted a number of bids which are aimed at creating consumer confidence, stimulating demand and enhancing business capability in this sector. One such bid is for a voucher scheme for accommodation and attraction providers which will kick start demand and bring benefits to the wider tourism and hospitality eco-system across Northern Ireland.

Additionally, my department has put forward significant bids in the area of skills and youth training. These bids not only provide businesses right across Northern Ireland with financial support they need to bring back and retain their apprentices, but also provides those businesses and individuals with the skills and opportunities necessary to succeed into the future.

Looking to other individual bids currently under consideration, I would highlight the bids to reboot the screen industry, which aims to capture greater gains within the growing games sector, and for Catalyst Co-Founders, a programme for entrepreneurs. Both of these interventions demonstrate potential to deliver genuine regional activity.

I know there is more to be done and I will continue to work with my Executive colleagues to develop a collective approach to recovery.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how the 2019 tariff for RHI claimants provides the 12 per cent return promised.

(AQO 771/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The 2019 tariff was based on calculations carried out by industry experts Ricardo. Full details on the calculation of the tariffs, including the underlying evidence base and methodology for achieving a typical 12% internal rate of return going forward, was contained in Ricardo's report published as part of the public consultation in 2018.

In bringing forward the 2019 tariffs, DfE committed to keeping tariffs under review and revising them if underlying conditions merited it. Cornwall Insight was engaged to carry out a further independent review of the medium biomass tariffs. To ensure the tariff continues to achieve a 12% return, Cornwall proposed an increase in the medium biomass tariffs to reflect the change in underlying costs since publication of the Ricardo report.

A public consultation on the implementation of Cornwall's findings closed on 26 May 2020. In the period following the Cornwall analysis there have been further substantial movements in the fossil fuel market.

The tariff review has been paused to allow work on closure of the scheme to proceed, with the Cornwall tariff recommendations together with analysis of recent fuel price movements being taken into account in options relating to scheme closure.

Closing the Non-Domestic RHI Scheme is a complex matter – there are cases currently before the courts. State aid, value for money and other matters need to be carefully considered.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for the Economy how vocational, general and other qualifications will be delivered in 2020-2021.
(AQO 772/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As part of the Department's ongoing Covid 19 response, extensive work is underway with key stakeholders to mitigate disruption to the delivery of vocational qualifications in 2020-21 through the adaptation of assessments and qualifications. This is to ensure that learners have the opportunity to receive fair and consistent results and are not disadvantaged by the longer term impacts of the pandemic.

Whilst it is anticipated that a wide range of vocational qualifications will be able to be delivered as normal at present, significant contingency planning is underway by awarding organisations and learning centres to respond to particular circumstances, such as local or national lockdown.

It is imperative that there continues to be close working between Regulators to ensure a consistent approach for the significant number of vocational qualifications that are delivered across the UK to ensure ongoing portability and access for learners.

In relation to the delivery of higher education 20-21, institutions will deliver their courses using a blended learning approach which includes both online delivery and socially distanced face-to-face teaching.

The Department for Education has responsibility for general qualifications.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the expansion of broadband coverage.

(AQO 773/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I fully appreciate the impact of poor broadband on local communities, particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland. I also recognise that the Covid-19 crisis has emphasised the greater challenges faced by those with poor broadband coverage.

As you will be aware, my Department has developed Project Stratum, a major telecoms project which aims to utilise funding of £165 million to increase access to 30 Megabits per second broadband services or greater for those, primarily rural, premises currently unable to access such services. The project's target intervention area consists of just under 79,000 premises and some 97% are rural, defined as NISRA Band H – settlements of fewer than 1,000 and open countryside.

The evaluation of bids for the project is now complete and the necessary corporate governance and approvals processes are underway. Contract award is expected by mid-October 2020. The overarching aspiration of the project continues to be to maximise coverage across the target intervention area.

My Department also continues to engage with Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to ensure NI benefits from the UK Government's ambitious targets around gigabit capable broadband.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy what steps she is taking to implement the recent resolution of the Assembly to establish a business hardship fund.

(AQO 774/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The pandemic has had a devastating impact on our economy. The Executive and UK Government's support throughout the response phase of the crisis has been extensive, but I am aware that some businesses and individuals continue to face hardship as a result of the crisis.

As we move beyond the immediate response phase, it is now important that we start the process to rebuild our economy. The Executive has agreed an economic recovery framework to provide the foundation for economic, health and societal renewal.

I have made a number of bids to the Executive seeking funds to deliver a wide ranging and comprehensive programme of interventions to further the rebuilding of the economy. These include support for key areas of innovation, skills and tourism.

The bids will assist businesses across many sectors of the NI economy, including those sectors which have been hit the hardest such as tourism, retail and manufacturing. They include support to a range of different businesses, including micro-businesses, SMEs and social enterprises.

I can assure members that I will do all I can to support my Executive Colleagues as we navigate the challenging times ahead and work towards economic recovery and the rebuilding of our economy.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the scientific evidence regarding the health and environmental impact of fracking.

(AQO 775/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As part of the ongoing review of the petroleum licencing regime in Northern Ireland, my Department has been working to commission independent research to consider the impact of petroleum exploration and development. Officials are currently working through the final stages of the procurement exercise and expect to be in position to provide an update to bidders in due course.

The planned research project is intended to provide the Department with a detailed assessment of the economic, environmental and social impacts of onshore oil and gas exploration and development in Northern Ireland.

The independent contractor will also analyse research on the impacts of unconventional oil and gas exploration, previously completed in Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland and report on its applicability to Northern Ireland. This research is designed to supplement the Department's understanding of the issues, including health considerations. Many of the potential health impacts related to petroleum licencing, whether that be through conventional or unconventional methods, are as a result of the impacts on the environment which are also to be addressed by the research.

This will be a detailed piece of work, covering a wide range of complex issues and it is not possible at this stage to pre-empt its findings. I anticipate, however, that public health will be one of a number of important issues covered in the final Report which will be used to inform my recommendations to the Executive on future petroleum licencing policy, as well as current petroleum licence applications.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission to publish a full inventory and valuation of Assembly artefacts, including those (i) on display; and (ii) in storage including their valuation.

(AQW 6767/17-22)

Mr Blair (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The latest inventory of Assembly artefacts, which includes their location and, where appropriate, the current valuation of each item is set out below.

Artefacts

This section contains a list of items which are deemed to be of historical significance. The current location of each item is noted and, where appropriate, a current valuation is included.

Item Description	Item Location	Item Valuation
Part model of Parliament Buildings	Off-site storage	£8,000
Table with Map of Northern Ireland	Off-site storage	£10,000
Roll of Honour Table	Off-site storage	£2,000
Books containing the names of the civilian war dead	Library Room 141	N/A
Assorted items from the Speaker's Office	Off-site storage	N/A
Ceremonial Sword	Off-site storage	N/A
William IV two-handled Vase	First Minister's Office	£6,000
Ornamental Stand for the Bell from "HMS Ulster"	Off-site storage	£1,500
A Carved and Gilded Throne Chair	Off-site storage	£7,000
2 x Silver Maces	Speaker's Office	£20,000
2 x Jardinières made from the timbers of the "Mountjoy"	1nr. Speaker's Office 1nr. Apprentice Boys Hall, Londonderry	£1,000
A Japanese Officer's Sword presented to the people of Northern Ireland by Lord Mountbatten of Burma.	First Minister's Office	£1,000
Black Rod's Wand of Office	First Minister's Office	£5,000
Two Red Leather Dispatch Boxes with the Royal Arms of Ulster	Senate Chamber	£4,000
Bell from "HMS Ulster"	First Minister's Office	N/A
Collection of Clerks' Uniforms	Off-site storage	N/A
Model of Thiepval Tower	Off-site storage	N/A
The Uniform of the Sergeant at Arms	Offsite storage	£1,000
French Mantle Clock	Off-site storage	N/A
Items of Crockery	Off-site storage	N/A
The Parliament Golf Handicap Challenge Cup 1927	First Minister's Office	£1,000
Silver Lighter	First Minister's Office	N/A
Bust of Frederick Temple	Off-site storage	£3,000
Mantle Clock	Off-site storage	£1,000
Egg Timer	Off-site storage	N/A
Coins	Off-site storage	N/A
Various Military Items	Off-site storage	N/A
Framed Letter from HRH Duke of Edinburgh	Off-site storage	N/A
Speaker's Robes and Wig	Senate Rotunda Parliament Buildings	£1,500
Herald's Tabard	Dublin Castle (Temporary Exhibition)	To be confirmed
Gilt-tooled Dispatch box	Principal Deputy Speaker's Office	£1,500
Victorian Tea Service	Speaker's Office	£2,000
Major Daniel Dixon's Lingfield Hurdle Cup 1928	First Minister's Office	£2,000
Royal Irish Rifles Silver Cup 1903	First Minister's Office	£2,000
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Letter	Off-site storage	N/A

Item Description	Item Location	Item Valuation
Brass Lamp Parts	Off-site storage	N/A
Oak Long Case Clock	Room 25 Parliament Buildings	N/A
3 x Warehouse Cages filled with Books	Off-site storage	N/A
3 x Chandeliers (boxed)	Off-site storage	N/A
Elizabeth II Coronation Vase	First Minister's Office	£10,000

Artwork

This section contains a list of all paintings and pictures owned by the Assembly. The current location of each item is noted and, where appropriate, a current valuation is included.

Item Description	Item Location	Item Valuation
Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference Pictures	Off-site storage	N/A
Official Opening of Parliament Buildings (photograph)	First Minister's Office	N/A
Portrait of Sir Basil Brooke	At the family home	£3,000
Portrait of Sir Henry Wilson MP	Off-site storage	£1,500
State Opening of Parliament, small	Senate Chamber	£25,000
State Opening of Parliament, large	Dublin Castle (Temporary Exhibition)	£50,000
Portrait of Lord Armaghdale by Riviere	Off-site storage	£2,000
Portrait of HM Queen Elizabeth II by Lydia de Burgh	On Loan, Hillsborough Castle	£1,500
Portrait of Frederick Temple, 3rd Marquess of Dufferin and Ava by C Williams	Off-site storage	£3,000
Portrait of Rt Hon JM Andrews by F McKelvey	Off-site storage	£2,000
The Obelisk on the Boyne by J Tudor	On Loan, Hillsborough Castle	£300,000
The House Will Divide by Noel Murphy	Senate Chamber	£15,000
Portrait of Seamus Mallon by Rita Duffy	Great Hall North Balcony	£5,000
Rowel Friars Drawings	Members' Bar	£14,250
The Assembly in Session by Noel Murphy	Speaker's Office	£3,000
La Baie	Speaker's Office	N/A
Portrait of Lord Bannside by Nolan	Great Hall North Balcony	£8,000
Portrait of Martin McGuinness by Tony Bell	Great Hall North Balcony	£8,000
Portrait of Eileen Bell by Conor Walton	Great Hall West Balcony	£5,000
Portrait of Lord Alderdice by Carol Graham	Great Hall West Balcony	£7,000
Portrait of Lord Trimble by Nolan	Great Hall North Balcony	£5,000
Portrait of Mark Durkan by Conor Walton	Great Hall North Balcony	£5,000
Oil painting by P Van Meulen	Speaker's Office	£50,000
Portrait of Lord Craigavon by N Becker	Off-site storage	£3,000
Queen Victoria's Jubilee	Off-site storage	N/A
Picture of the Irish House of Commons	Speaker's Office	N/A
Portrait of Seamus Heaney by Ross Wilson	Senate Rotunda	£8,000
Portrait of CS Lewis by Ross Wilson	Senate Rotunda	£8,000
View of Belmont & Glenmachan	Offsite storage	N/A

Item Description	Item Location	Item Valuation
Miscellaneous photographs	Offsite storage	N/A
Parliament Historic Occasions Photographs 1945	Offsite storage	N/A

Miss Woods asked the Assembly Commission whether it has assessed the feasibility of providing free sanitary products in Parliament Buildings.

(AQW 7318/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission assessed the feasibility of providing free sanitary products in Parliament Buildings in February 2020 and, shortly after, a range of sanitary products were made freely available in facilities accessible to the public, on a trial basis.

As this was only a few weeks prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and, since visitors are not currently able to access Parliament Buildings, the Assembly Commission has not yet been able to evaluate the success of this initiative.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 9 October 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail their plans to update the Racial Equality Strategy.
(AQW 4689/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): There are currently no plans to update the Racial Equality Strategy. The Strategy is intended to act as a driver for improvements in policy and service delivery and identifies a number of key commitments. Our immediate priority is therefore to implement the commitments in the 2015-2025 Strategy including the Refugee Integration Strategy and proposals for Ethnic Monitoring.

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will review the Minority Ethnic Development Fund to allow for the award of funding for up to three years at a time, rather than on the current annual basis, to enable longer term planning.

(AQW 5569/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: As per the commitment in the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2020, the delivery model for the Minority Ethnic Development Fund is currently being reviewed.

This is expected to complete in the coming weeks and we will consider all resulting recommendations, including any regarding the period for funding awards.

Ms Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of delays caused by COVID-19, to provide an updated timeline for the completion of Grade A office facilities on the former Ebrington Barracks site in Derry.

(AQW 5831/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Construction of the Grade A office building at Ebrington is expected to complete by March 2022.

When complete, we anticipate that this project will bring significant benefits to the City and region.

Ms Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide clarification for the lack of Community Relations Council funding allocated to Derry and Mid-Ulster.

(AQW 5834/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: All applications to CRC's funding schemes are assessed using the same robust methodology and scored against set criteria. Applications are scored by a panel of CRC staff with awards made in merit order. CRC work closely with wider stakeholders to identify areas of need, taking into account other sources of funding which communities in specific areas may benefit from.

Where a need is identified, CRC use welcoming statements to encourage bids from a particular geographic or thematic area and organise information events, in collaboration with TEO and District Councils, to raise awareness of funding available. Follow up support is then provided to groups if they decide to make an application.

In 2019/20, 15 of CRC's 30 core funded groups delivered good relations projects in the Derry City & Strabane and Mid-Ulster Council areas, with a further 28 grants awarded to organisations, both core funded and non-core funded for delivery in both areas. Overall, funding of £704k was awarded by CRC to groups delivering in Derry City & Strabane and Mid-Ulster Council areas 2019/20.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for their assessment of the ongoing trade negotiations between the UK and the EU; (ii) for their assessment of the impact of the UK Government's approach to the UK internal market in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol; and (iii) whether they will be responding to the consultation on the UK Government's approach to the UK internal market white paper.

(AQW 5916/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Future relationship negotiations are the responsibility of the UK Government, however we have repeatedly stressed we must be involved, particularly where an area is our responsibility or touches on our devolved competence.

We welcome the new intensified model for the current future relationship negotiations as increasing both focus and momentum although we still are concerned that significant issues remain. These must be resolved urgently to give our citizens and businesses the necessary time to prepare for the end of the Transition Period on 31 December 2020.

We are working with Executive colleagues to consider the implications for us from the recently published UK Internal Market White Paper. We can confirm that it is our intention to respond to the consultation.

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) when guidance will be published for business and third parties on the movement of goods from GB to Northern Ireland, as promised before the end of the transition period; and (ii) when further guidance will be published for Northern Ireland traders placing certain highly regulated goods on the GB market. **(AQW 6011/17-22)**

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Withdrawal Agreement, of which the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol is part, is an agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union. As International Relations is an excepted matter under the terms of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the implementation of the Protocol is a responsibility of the UK Government.

In the Command Paper setting out the UK Government's approach to the Protocol there is a commitment to provide guidance before the end of the Transition Period for:

- 1 Businesses and third parties on the movement of goods east to west,
- 2 Our traders placing regulated goods on the GB market.

We will continue to engage with the UK Government to ensure that these commitments are fulfilled.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have to reopen a Support for the Bereaved Acknowledgement Scheme, which was previously facilitated by the Victims and Survivors Service until it was closed to new applicants on 31 March 2017. **(AQW 6745/17-22)**

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Our officials have been working with the Commission for Victims and Survivors (CVS) and the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) to look at options to meet the needs of bereaved victims and survivors. We expect to receive these options shortly and will consider them carefully before deciding on the best way forward.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that the previous strategy has now expired, to outline (i) the next steps around the development of a new victim and survivor strategy; and (ii) their plans to replace the Victims' Commissioner. **(AQW 6837/17-22)**

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The current strategy for Victims and Survivors has been extended to November 2021. We will consider a future strategy in due course.

We are currently considering the options for the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, but have ensured that interim arrangements are in place within the Commission to provide continued support for victims and survivors.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) what funding their Department has made to the Rainbow Project; and (ii) the purpose for which the money was awarded, in each of the last three years. **(AQW 7828/17-22)**

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has not provided any funding to the Rainbow Project in each of the last three years.

Mr McGuigan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any progress made on an updated Racial Equality Strategy. **(AQO 630/17-22)**

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We are half way through the current 10 year Racial Equality Strategy. Whilst we have made significant progress towards the key outcomes, we have always recognised the scale of the challenges involved. We remain committed to full implementation of the strategy and the key actions within it. This is a high priority for us, and we would hope for all, as we alone cannot eradicate racism and inequality.

We will continue to monitor progress to inform any future review or update of the strategy.

Mr Lynch asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of the Together: Building a United Community strategy.

(AQO 632/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: There has been significant progress in delivering the T:BUC Strategy including its headline actions.

Over 20,000 young people have taken part in T:BUC Camps and five Urban Villages have been established.

Five Shared Education Campuses have been approved and are in progress. 10 shared neighbourhoods, providing 483 new homes, have been completed.

Over 4,000 young people have participated in the Peace4Youth programme. Approximately 2,700 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 £19m per annum to support Strategy delivery across communities.

Mrs Barton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the new Commissioner for Victims and Survivors will be appointed.

(AQO 633/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We are currently considering the options for the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.

We are aware that there are significant issues for Victims and Survivors at this time, which makes it important that we consider the way forward fully and move forward in the right way.

In the meantime we recognise that continuity is important for victims and survivors and so we are also ensuring that interim arrangements are in place within the Commission, to allow the provision of continued support for victims and survivors.

Mr Dickson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the appointment of a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.

(AQO 635/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We are currently considering the options for the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.

We are aware that there are significant issues for Victims and Survivors at this time, which makes it important that we consider the way forward fully and move forward in the right way.

In the meantime we recognise that continuity is important for victims and survivors and so we are also ensuring that interim arrangements are in place within the Commission, to allow the provision of continued support for victims and survivors.

Ms Bailey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have had with Executive colleagues, the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office with regard to the commissioning of abortion services in line with the new legislative framework.

(AQO 629/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Minister of Health has advised his Executive Colleagues that work on developing a full commissioning specification for abortion services has not progressed while the Health and Social care system deals with COVID-19. The Executive will consider any future proposals he may bring to it on this matter. We have not discussed the commissioning of these services with the Secretary of State.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail how his Department concluded from their Test of Likely Significance, as part of their screening procedure under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, that the 2014 NAP Regulations are not likely to give rise to any significant effects on Natura 2000 sites.

(AQW 6267/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Test of Likely Significance on the Nitrates Action Programme (NAP) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 noted potential effects for various Natura 2000 sites. In summary, these were a reduction in diffuse and point source water pollution and an improvement in surface water and groundwater quality. The NAP measures controlling methods of slurry storage and application should also have reduced the potential for ammonia emissions leading to nitrogen deposition and nutrient enrichment of sensitive habitats.

The NAP measures will have had no effect on some Natura 2000 features. For those features which may have been affected by the NAP measures, any impact resulting from implementation of the NAP was likely to be beneficial. Therefore, the findings

of the screening report concluded that the measures in the NAP were unlikely to have any significant [detrimental] effects (either alone or in combination with other plans or projects) on Natura 2000 sites.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) considered this conclusion and were of the opinion that in the circumstances of the particular case the conclusions drawn could be reasonably and objectively accepted.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Prosperity Agreement signed between the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Dale Farm, specifically on the objectives (i) reduced nutrient run-off and improved water quality on Dale Farm supplier farms; and (ii) improved biodiversity on Dale Farm sites and supply farms. **(AQW 6602/17-22)**

Mr Poots: Dale Farm signed a Prosperity Agreement with NIEA on 21 August 2019, committing them to a series of actions to support environmental improvements. You have sought an update in relation to progress in two areas, water quality and biodiversity.

Nutrient run-off and water quality

In collaboration with DAERA and AFBI, Dale Farm has been supporting the delivery of key messages to their supplier farms making them aware of, and promoting articles on, matching nutrients to crop requirements, the reduction of nutrient run off, reducing soil compaction, changes in Nutrient Regulations and ammonia abatement strategies. They also offer a soil testing and nutrient management advice service.

Dale Farm provide support to their supplier farms to help ensure compliance with the Red Tractor Standard. All Dale Farm suppliers must be audited and certified under this scheme. The Red Tractor Standard includes requirements on avoiding nutrient run off into waterways including best practice in silage, organic and inorganic nutrient management including a nutrient management plan.

With regard to Dale Farm itself, a new effluent plant upgrade has recently been completed at their Dromona site. This will ensure that effluent continues to be properly managed and controlled to avoid any water quality impacts.

Biodiversity

In relation to biodiversity Dale Farm have signed up to the all-Ireland pollinator plan. Under this plan they have planted alder trees along the bank of the Lissan Water at Dunmanbridge. They are also seeking to tackle invasive alien species in the area by investigating the treatment of Giant hog weed at Dunmanbridge.

In addition Dale Farm has been promoting the biodiversity message to their supplier farms including circulating information about the Environmental Farming Scheme and highlighting the environmental benefits. This is helping to raise awareness of the impact that farming can have on ecosystems, while encouraging uptake of the Environmental Farming Scheme measures that can help address some of the issues.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Prosperity Agreement signed between the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Linden Foods and Linergy, specifically on the objective of enhanced on-farm biodiversity. **(AQW 6603/17-22)**

Mr Poots: Linden Foods and Linergy signed a three year Prosperity Agreement with NIEA in August 2014. This agreement expired in 2017, however they are in active discussions with NIEA to sign a second agreement, work on which was delayed due to Covid-19.

Linden Foods

During the period of their agreement Linden Foods installed an innovative heat exchange refrigeration system which enabled them to meet their 25% carbon emissions reduction target. It also created an improved production environment. The system resulted in a 75% reduction in gas oil use and 10% reduction in electricity use. Subsequently, Linden converted their Dungannon sites to gas, delivering further significant CO2 savings. Adoption of various technologies throughout the site has enabled them to deliver on their target of continual improvement with regards to resource consumption.

Linden were involved in a number of supply chain initiatives where they sought to influence their farmers and producers to adhere to good environmental practice. They worked with farmers on rearing calves to ensure high quality and welfare and have supported farmers in undertaking soil sampling to facilitate targeted and efficient fertiliser application, reducing diffuse pollution, and enhancing on farm efficiency by minimising waste. Direct work with their own Sustainable Beef clubs have included sessions on bio-diversity; carbon foot printing, and supporting the work of 8 Farm Business Development groups. Linden Foods staff have participated in a number of activities, including assisting in the planting of native hedgerows.

In addition Linden has sign posted information on compliance via the NetRegs website and participated in a video to promote environmental good practice.

Linergy

Linergy has worked actively with both farmers and the meat industry throughout Northern Ireland to increase collection frequency of raw materials and fallen stock. Farmers are encouraged to deliver their fresh fallen stock to Linergy sites in Granville and in Glenavy thereby providing increased bio-security and reducing the risks to bio-diversity on farms.

The freshness of material sent to rendering is also key to the quality of biofuels produced and there has been a marked improvement in quality since the scheme began including reduced odour issues and improved material handling and higher yields.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Prosperity Agreement signed between Northern Ireland Environment Agency and John Thompson and Sons Ltd, specifically on the objectives (i) Agri-Food sector growth is enabled in a way that does not create environmental harm; and (ii) improved sustainability of livestock production in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6604/17-22)

Mr Poots: Thompsons signed a Prosperity Agreement with NIEA on 27 July 2015. Although this agreement expired in January 2019 the company are actively working with NIEA to sign a second agreement by the end of 2020.

Since signing their Prosperity Agreement, Thompsons have:

- reduced their energy use by 13.1% and in turn reduced CO2 emissions by 14%;
- Increased waste recycling by 26%;
- Reduced their water usage over the lifetime of the agreement by approximately 110,000 litres of water and reduced water usage by a further 6% in the last year.

Thompsons feed efficiency research projects in partnerships with AFBI and the Agri-food Quest Competency Centre pioneered lower protein pig diets. These pigs finishing diets have been shown under trial conditions to reduce ammonia emissions by up to 49%, reduce water consumption by 25% and reduce slurry output by 38%.

As part of their protein efficient pig finisher diets, Thompsons have reduced their requirements for soya by over 9,000 tonnes per annum - a total of just over 45,000 tonnes of soya saved during the period of Prosperity Agreement. This equates to approximately a 16% reduction in Greenhouse Gas Emissions per kg of pig meat. Thompsons have also committed, to source RTRS Soya (Round Table on Responsible Soya), a fully audited and accredited scheme ensuring sourcing of sustainably farmed soya.

As part of a second Prosperity Agreement a planned Thompsons objective includes investigating if environmental benefits can be achieved in dairy cows via nutritional manipulation and improved feed efficiency. The proposed AFBI led project in partnership with Trouw Nutrition, aims to investigate the environmental, scientific and commercial implications of "Reducing Nitrogen excretion from dairy cows through dietary manipulation" (Evidence and Innovation Project, 19/1/16).

The Thompsons Sales & Technical Team have completed Field Advisors Training and registration. This is an UK Feed Industry environmental scheme, which provides feed advisors with the knowledge to discuss with farmers in NI and advise on the role feed and nutrition can play on environmental impact of the farm.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Prosperity Agreement signed between the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Lakeland Dairies (NI), specifically on the commitment to improve pollution risk including ammonia emissions.

(AQW 6605/17-22)

Mr Poots: Lakeland Dairies (NI) (Lakeland Dairies) signed a Prosperity Agreement with NIEA on 14 June 2018.

Key achievements to date include reducing their CO2 emissions by 15% and achieving their target of sending zero waste to landfill. NIEA has provided Lakeland Dairies farm advisers with information and awareness on the environmental aspects of Commitment 1 to assist them with influencing their supply chain. As a result Lakeland Dairies farm advisers have provided over 800 farmers with guidance on environmental matters, the latest regulatory requirements and information on good practice in pollution prevention and reduction in ammonia emissions.

In addition, in 2017 Lakeland partnered with Ulster Wildlife to deliver a tractor cab guide to Northern Ireland wildlife, helping farmers across NI identify key plant and animal species and better understand their habitat requirements. Additionally, 4.8 acres of Lakeland property is managed to support pollinators and Lakeland are signatories to the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan.

Lakeland have facilitated 10 visits from young farmers and third level education establishments, including a sustainability leadership element. Lakeland are continually seeking to improve their facilities and process and in the short time since joining the programme have invested £1M in new milk reception infrastructure to improve resource efficiency and reduce waste.

Lakeland's milk suppliers are independent farmers. Part of the role of Lakeland Dairies (NI) is to signpost their members to relevant guidance, provide practical support to their suppliers and contribute to the development of an effective approach to address the Ammonia issue in Northern Ireland. They are active participants in a wide range of forums that are addressing the Ammonia issue in Northern Ireland. Lakeland Dairies encouraged their members to attend the Ammonia Abatement in Practice Study Tour to the Netherlands in 2019, part of CAFRE's Farm Innovation Visits Programme. Lakeland Dairies also attended at their own cost. Following the visit, Lakeland Dairies shared the lessons from the visit with their milk suppliers.

Information and guidance on ammonia reduction techniques (such as low emission spreading, flooring systems to reduce ammonia etc) is provided to their suppliers by their member relations team during their farm visits. Articles and links to information on these topics also regularly appear in their monthly supplier newsletter.

They provide a subsidised soil testing programme for their farmers. This enables their farmers to determine the correct amount of slurry to be applied to land thus avoiding excess spreading and its associated ammonia release. 2,000 soil samples were taken in the winter of 2019/2020.

In 2019 they started providing Urea milk tests to all their milk suppliers. This test helps ensure the optimal amount of protein is fed to the cows, reducing ammonia emissions resulting from a diet too high in protein.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the evidential basis for his statement that the Greening requirement has not delivered any identifiable benefit for the environment in Northern Ireland; and (ii) how his Department will guarantee that there will be no immediate deterioration in biodiversity standards following his announcement that Greening requirements for the Basic Payment Scheme will be discontinued.

(AQW 6708/17-22)

Mr Poots: Greening was introduced at EU level to address the impact of the large cereal growing areas on the environment where wheat may be the sole crop grown and where there was an absence of landscape features such as hedges. These are not issues that exist in Northern Ireland given that permanent grassland constitutes close to 92% of our agricultural land and total grassland is over 95% of agricultural land. The Greening requirements of Crop Diversification and Ecological Focus Areas (EFAs) have had very little or no impact on farming practice in Northern Ireland. Our cereal area continues to decline which actually raises biodiversity concerns as grass becomes ever more dominant and the additional bureaucracy that has been introduced as regards growing arable crops is not helpful. EFA obligations are currently being met largely by farmers declaring existing features which are already protected under cross compliance. Therefore, I reached the conclusion that the Greening requirements of Crop Diversification and EFA are not delivering any identifiable environmental benefits in Northern Ireland and should be discontinued from the beginning of the 2021 Scheme Year.

I have decided that rather than persist with a failed initiative, it is much better to focus our efforts and resources on developing a set of bespoke environmental measures that will ensure the delivery of environmental outcomes tailored for Northern Ireland and which are adequately funded. In the meantime, I do not see the benefit of continuing with requirements that are extremely bureaucratic, not delivering environmental benefits and which could be hindering biodiversity.

With regard to ensuring that there will be no immediate deterioration in biodiversity standards, it is important to remember that Northern Ireland already has in place a robust set of environmental laws designed to protect these standards. It is also important to remember that landscape features such as hedges and sheughs continue to be protected under Cross Compliance. In addition I have ensured that Environmentally Sensitive Permanent Grassland (ESPG) continues to be provided with the highest level of protection by incorporating this Greening requirement into the rules governing the Basic Payment Scheme.

I hope you find this response helpful.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, apart from the legislation currently in place, what plans he has for improving animal welfare standards in agriculture.

(AQW 6976/17-22)

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 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.

In addition, my Department has published six codes of practice for farmed animals which provide practical guidance regarding owning and keeping particular species. These codes are reviewed in line with scientific developments.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to an expected increase in regulatory sanitary and phytosanitary screening of animals and food products, what measures his Department is taking to prevent delays in supply chains.

(AQW 7056/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have been clear all along that I want this aspect of the Northern Ireland Protocol implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of goods into and out of Northern Ireland, one that works for our businesses and citizens.

I have directly engaged with Minister Eustice on several occasions in the past months to ensure that we take the necessary steps to minimise and remove where possible the impacts on the movement of goods, including food, into and out of Northern Ireland.

At all stages, I have clearly outlined to my officials as part of the programme delivery that I want to see the levels of facilities minimised, that any physical inspections at the points of entry are as low as possible and that any costs to businesses are removed. I have indeed challenged them on several occasions over the past months asking them to consider in detail how these requirements are met, as I am mindful that negotiations with the EU commission are ongoing.

DAERA are currently developing proposals in conjunction with Defra and will share them in due course. Their discussions with UK Government colleagues have also included Food Supply Contingency planning in relation to Northern Ireland. DAERA, working collaboratively with other Executive Departments, continues to lead on the regular assessment of the health of Northern Ireland's food supply chain and my officials are committed to developing associated contingency plans.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the various decisions taken and directions given since 1 June 2020 on the provision of infrastructure at Northern Ireland ports arising from the Withdrawal Agreement Protocol, broken down by (i) date; and (ii) content.

(AQW 7220/17-22)

Mr Poots: Following the UK Government's command paper on the Protocol dated 20 May 2020, the Executive agreed to appoint the DAERA Permanent Secretary on 26 May 2020 as Senior Responsible Owner for the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Delivery Programme.

In this role, he has assembled a small team to lead the development of the SPS system that will meet the obligations emerging from the Protocol. Preliminary proposals were presented to the EU Commission in early July which were in keeping with my strong desire to minimise the impact on businesses and consumers arising from this aspect of the Protocol. The precise specification of the system will depend both on the outcome of the negotiations between the EU and the UK on a future trading relationship and on the parallel discussions on the implementation of the Protocol. Therefore the final system specification is not yet defined within this evolving position.

In this context, I have made clear to the Defra Secretary of State that if the Sovereign Government insists the SPS regime be implemented under the Protocol, it must be minimised in terms of its effects on the movement of animal and plant products into Northern Ireland and I am assured that he and his officials are fully committed to delivering this outcome through on-going engagement with the EU Commission.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what resistance, if any, is being offered to the provision of infrastructure at Northern Ireland ports arising from the Withdrawal Agreement protocol.

(AQW 7223/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have been clear all along that I oppose the Northern Ireland Protocol. As Westminster passed it into law it is legally binding and it should therefore be implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of goods into and out of Northern Ireland, one that works for our businesses and citizens.

I have directly engaged with Minister Eustice on several occasions in the past months to ensure that if the Sovereign Government requires it then the necessary steps to minimise and remove where possible the impacts on the movement of goods, including food, into and out of Northern Ireland must be taken. I am content that I have sought clarity from the UK Government throughout and where necessary I have taken legal advice to support my considerations as my officials seek to develop effective options in response to a complex and time sensitive task.

At all stages, I have clearly outlined to officials my opposition to additional checks. If they are legally binding I want to see the levels of facilities minimised, that any physical inspections at the points of entry are as low as possible and that any costs to businesses are removed. I have indeed challenged them on several occasions over the past months asking them to consider in detail how these requirements are minimised, as I am mindful that negotiations with the EU commission are ongoing.

My officials are currently developing proposals in conjunction with Defra to achieve my aim and I will of course share them in due course. I believe it is because of my challenges that we are actually holding both the UK Government and the EU Commission to account in ensuring there is a minimised impact on Northern Ireland as we seek to deliver against the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why no Areas of Special Scientific Interest have been declared since 1 January 2019.

(AQW 7270/17-22)

Mr Poots: Referring to my earlier response (AQW 1002/17-22), in recent years the primary focus of officials has been on the protection and management of our 394 designated sites, and bringing them under favourable management. Actions have included engaging with landowners and delivery partners in identifying appropriate management to attain favourable condition on the specific features of the site. I will be considering the way forward with regard to our designated site network with officials.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether plans exist to widen the rollout of real-time updates to alert bathers concerning water quality at additional sites across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7322/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA currently provide funding for the EU's INTERREG VA, SWIM. This project led by University College Dublin, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute is a cross-border research programme developing a live bathing water quality prediction system. The system, currently available at 9 locations, 6 of which are Northern Ireland

identified bathing waters, will enable short-term pollution events to be predicted. These predictions will be communicated to the general public via electronic beach signage, a smart-phone app, a website and social media.

This project is due for completion within the next year and DAERA has already secured funding and commenced work with Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute to investigate, model and if appropriate expand the live bathing water quality prediction system across Northern Ireland's 26 identified bathing waters during the bathing season. It is envisaged that these projects on automated water quality predictions will better inform the public, alerting them to water quality issues.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will consider increasing water quality sampling at designated bathing sites more frequently than weekly.

(AQW 7323/17-22)

Mr Poots: The current statutory regime of testing is considered sufficient in monitoring the general health of bathing waters. However more frequent sampling of waters is already undertaken in reaction to pollution events which may affect the quality of a bathing water.

As part of the statutory annual bathing water monitoring programme, all 26 of Northern Ireland's identified bathing waters are sampled and tested for microbiological parameters on a minimum of 19 occasions between 01 June and 15 September each year (the bathing season), with additional sampling just prior to the commencement of the bathing season. A reduced programme of sampling was carried out during 2020, due to the COVID restrictions.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will engage with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to brief (i) MPs and Members on the work of the Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams on keeping our sea-lanes safe, and; (ii) the Assembly on the role of the MoD in supporting our nation.

(AQW 7357/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am assuming that your question has arisen by the landing of two explosive shells dating from WW2 by a local fishing vessel into Ardglass Harbour. My priority as Fisheries Minister has been to ensure that fishers understand the protocols to follow in the event of trawling up unexploded ordnance. I instructed my officials to contact all the skippers and owners of the NI fishing fleet directing them to the official Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) guidance on the matter. This was completed on 23 September.

I am fully committed to working with our partners in government like MCA, the Royal Navy and PSNI to protect our fishing industry, but have no plans to request that the MOD briefs MPs or MLA.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what is required to implement Sanitary and Phytosanitary measures of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7364/17-22)

Mr Poots: Under the EU Official Controls Regulation (OCR), there is a requirement for Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks to be carried out on certain goods coming into Northern Ireland. The OCR forms part of domestic law and, under the Northern Ireland Protocol, there will be an obligation to continue to align with it following the end of the transition period.

As a consequence of OCR requirements, Point of Entry facilities, designated by the European Union, will be required at Belfast, Larne, Warrenpoint and Foyle Ports and also the Northern Ireland airports (along with the necessary processes, IT capabilities and personnel). This will enable the continued movement of animal and plant products, plants and live animals into Northern Ireland following the end of the transition period.

This is consistent with the UK Government's Command Paper – 'The UK's Approach to the Northern Ireland Protocol' – which stated the need to expand some existing entry points for agri-food goods to provide for proportionate additional controls.

In common with the UK Government, I am clear that the Northern Ireland Protocol needs to be implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of agri-food trade and does not increase costs for businesses and people living in Northern Ireland. My officials are, therefore, working to minimise the need for infrastructure.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on any bids made in the last monitoring round to the Department of Finance.

(AQW 7365/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department did not submit any bids to the Department of Finance as part of the June Monitoring Round exercise.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether there are plans for interim arrangements to handle complaints in the event that the Office for Environmental Protection is not fully functional in Northern Ireland on 1 January 2021.

(AQW 7385/17-22)

Mr Poots: Delays to the Environment Bill's progress as a result of the Covid-19 crisis have made the aim of having the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) fully functional by 1 January 2021 much more challenging. It is obviously prudent

to prepare for the possibility that a delay may occur and, to that end, my officials are working closely with their Defra counterparts on a range of issues, including the potential need for interim arrangements to handle complaints.

Existing regulatory mechanisms will, of course, continue to operate after the end of the transition period and people will still be able to raise complaints through Departmental processes, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman or via the established judicial review process.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the staffing resources required for the Office for Environmental Protection to undertake its statutory functions in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7386/17-22)

Mr Poots: The commencement of the provisions relating to the extension of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) to Northern Ireland is, of course, subject to the future approval of the Assembly but, in anticipation of that, DAERA officials are engaged in preparatory work with Defra to consider detailed operational arrangements, including potential staffing requirements.

The UK Government has previously indicated that the overall staffing requirement will be 80-120. The OEP staff dedicated to undertaking its statutory functions in Northern Ireland could be affected by a range of factors but would be expected to be broadly proportionate. However, the OEP will also have access to specialist resources that could be deployed to advise on Northern Ireland cases as required.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in order that guide dog users can continue to cross the border freely without subjecting their dog to invasive veterinary checks, what action he has taken to mitigate the impact of the loss of pet passports for guide dogs.

(AQW 7396/17-22)

Mr Poots: Regulation (EU) 576/2013 details the documentary and health requirements for the travel of pet dogs, including assistance dogs, between and into EU Member States (MS) including the Republic of Ireland (ROI). This includes the requirement for the dogs to have a pet passport and rabies injection. This requirement will continue to apply to dogs travelling between Northern Ireland (NI) and EU Member States, including the ROI, after the transition period ends.

Historically, in recognition of the negligible risk of rabies associated with the movement of pets between NI and the ROI, there have been no systematic border checks on pets moving between the two jurisdictions. It is not envisaged that the position will change post transition although the Department reserves the right to initiate investigations and take action where sufficient intelligence exists.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, due to the cross-cutting nature of the Islandmagee Gas Caverns proposals, whether marine licensing decisions will be made by the wider Executive.

(AQW 7431/17-22)

Mr Poots: The application for a marine construction licence in relation to the proposed gas storage project at Islandmagee is being considered by officials in DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division. The other required DAERA consents to abstract and discharge water are also under review. Due to the strategic nature of the proposed Islandmagee project, the award or withholding of these consents will be subject to my decision.

Officials are currently working through the determinations. Once I have seen this material, I will consider whether there is a need to refer the decision to the Executive Committee in line with section 2.4 of the Ministerial Code and the Executive Committee (Functions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action his Department will take in order to prevent an infestation of pigeons in East Belfast and other urban areas.

(AQW 7467/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department does not have responsibility for preventing infestations of pigeons in urban areas. Feral pigeons are listed on the Wildlife Order General Licences in Northern Ireland and therefore 'authorised persons', or those acting on their behalf, can kill or take them or their eggs, and destroy their nests for the purposes outlined in the licenses. An authorised person in this case is defined as 'the owner or occupier, or any person authorised by the owner or occupier, of the land on which the action authorised is taken'. The relevant general licence is TPG/1/2020 which relates to the preservation of public health or public safety. Any person operating under the terms of a general licence must ensure that their actions relate to the licence purpose. Individuals may also consider the use of netting, or deterrent spikes on ledges to prevent birds roosting or nesting on buildings.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Prosperity Agreement signed between NI Environment Agency and Granville Ecopark Ltd, specifically on the following objectives; (i) enhanced biodiversity in the local area through partnership with the local council; (ii) more effective regulation of the anaerobic digestate sector; (iii)

increased networking between Granville, non-governmental organizations and local councils and; (iv) engagement with local environment groups and the community.

(AQW 7470/17-22)

Mr Poots: Granville Ecopark Ltd signed their Prosperity Agreement with NIEA on 26 September 2017. The agreement expired on 26 September 2020.

(i) Biodiversity

- Granville Ecopark Ltd are signatories to the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan and invested in the provision of an 86m³ bee habitat in 2018 using upcycled delivery boxes and empty electrical spool reels.

(ii) Anaerobic Digester /digestate (AD) sector regulation

- NIEA regulate anaerobic digesters via an authorisation which contains site specific conditions to ensure there are no unacceptable impacts to the environment. Depending on the circumstances, the use of digestate may require an additional waste authorisation.
- If complaints are made about specific sites then NIEA will investigate the complaints and regulate the site against the sites authorisation.
- From 1 February 2020, under The Nutrients Regulation Programme (NAP) 2019-2020, Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment (LESSE) must be used for spreading anaerobic digestate. Anaerobic digestate can only be applied where soil analysis shows there is a crop requirement for phosphorus. A fertilisation plan must be prepared by all farms using anaerobic digestate. Farms importing anaerobic digestate must not accept it unless it is accompanied by a record of nutrient content analysis.

(iii & iv) Local engagement and Networking

- Granville staff regularly take part in community outreach activities having visited 5 local schools to promote recycle week in October 2018 and welcomed students from South West College to tour the plant.
- In January 2020 Granville Ecopark began working with Eco-Schools NI in the Young Reporters for the Environment (YRE) Initiative and supporting a school in their project based on plastics.
- In February 2020 Granville ran a competition with six schools in the Mid-Ulster District, focusing on the use of food caddies and the importance of separating food waste.
- Granville Ecopark have accommodated students from CAFRE to work on a project enhancing food waste collection alongside Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his Department's assessment of biodiversity loss arising from ammonia emissions in Special Areas of Conservation.

(AQW 7472/17-22)

Mr Poots: 91% of Northern Ireland's Special Areas of Conservation are exceeding the lower critical level of 1 µg/m³ for ammonia, the level damaging for lower plants such as lichens, bryophytes and mosses. Where this critical level is exceeded, there will be a reduction in species richness.

My Department recognises the importance of reducing emissions to protect Northern Ireland's most important habitats for future generations. In order to deliver the tangible emission reductions needed to prevent further loss, I have expedited work on an ammonia strategy. I hope to consult on that way forward in the near future.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment on whether the trend of greatly reduced numbers and frequency of water quality sampling and inconsistent sampling of the same sites by his Department since 2009 may have resulted in water quality being given an inaccurate very good assessment in the Northern Ireland Statistics Report 2020; and (ii) how his Department will ensure that data quality issues are addressed.

(AQW 7473/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) I am confident that the data quality for water quality is assessed as 'very good' as it meets the criteria set out in the above mentioned statistical report. It is collated from quality controlled scientific monitoring programmes and all samples are analysed in appropriately accredited laboratories.
- (ii) My Department will ensure that water quality monitoring programmes are reviewed on a periodic basis to confirm that statutory and statistical requirements continue to be met, and remain fit for purpose.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what (i) financial; and (ii) other resources he is making available to help local councils become carbon neutral.

(AQW 7480/17-22)

Mr Poots: NI emissions are derived from a number of emissions sectors. DAERA leads in reducing emissions in the: Agriculture; Land Use Change and Forestry; and Waste sectors. In the waste sector the Household Waste Recycling Collaborative Change Programme provides capital funding assistance to local councils to improve recycling infrastructure and

services. To date 7 projects across 6 councils have been supported to a value of £3.54M resulting in estimated CO2 savings of 8,807.21 tonnes. My Department also funds Sustainable NI to support local Councils to reduce single-use plastic with many councils in the process of banning avoidable single-use plastic in their buildings and operations.

In the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry sector my department has provided grant aid of £0.05M to Mid Ulster District Council for planting two new publically accessible native woodlands over the last three years. Over a 40 years period from planting, these woodlands are estimated to capture 4,600 tonnes of CO2 equivalent.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the reopening of wet pubs, and as we continue to work to prevent the spread of COVID-19, what work has been taken with other Departments to discourage businesses from using plastic, non-reusable cups.

(AQW 7481/17-22)

Mr Poots: I acknowledge that the use of plastic, non-reusable cups represents a challenge during these unprecedented times, however, I am also acutely aware of the pressures businesses are currently facing due to the pandemic.

That said, my Department is funding an initiative to help reduce the amount of single-use plastic used by businesses, encourage reusables and promote behaviour change. The Tackling Plastics project, (run by Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and Sustainable NI) is piloting a business toolkit to help businesses "Reduce Pointless Plastic" and will enable behaviour change as things begin to normalise. Businesses and local councils have been very keen to engage with this so far, despite the ongoing crisis.

My Department has also recently engaged with the Education Authority to help promote the use of reusable alternatives in the education sector, following the re-opening of schools. To date, there have been no links with any other Departments in discouraging businesses from using plastic, non-reusable cups.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) what assessment his Department has made of the amount of plastic debris in the Irish Sea and Atlantic Ocean; and (ii) what steps they are taking to prevent any increase in the volume of plastic waste entering oceans, in particular as a result of discarded face masks used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 7484/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has been working closely with a range of partners to fully understand the sources and amount of plastic debris entering our seas. Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful (KNIB), who are funded by the Department, have been undertaking quarterly surveys of litter found on a representative sample of beaches around our coast since 2012. The results are published annually in the Northern Ireland Marine Litter Survey and are available on the DAERA website <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/marine-litter>

My Department has been exploring a range of approaches to prevent any increases in the volume of plastic waste entering the oceans, including partnering with KNIB and Sustainable NI on the Tackling Plastic project. This involves working with schools, businesses, the public sector and the wider public in identifying practical ways to reduce or eliminate many unnecessary single-use plastics.

My Department recently provided funding to KNIB which enabled the development of a media campaign to raise awareness of the potential harmful effects of PPE on the environment. The campaign included television and social media advertising and has been airing since July under the 'Live Here, Love Here' branding.

In addition, my Department has been conducting a social media campaign to encourage people to dispose of PPE in the correct and safe manner. Issue 14 of DAERA's Marine Litter Watch e-zine is due for publication on-line shortly.

Finally, my Department will be publishing a draft 'Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland' for public consultation in 2021. This will be Northern Ireland's first overarching Environment Strategy and it will include options to address the problem of littering in the future.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of the Northern Ireland Carrier Bag Levy in comparison to other parts of the UK; (ii) whether he intends to increase the Carrier Bag Levy in line with England; and (iii) whether he is minded to support a ban on the manufacture of plastic carrier bags.

(AQW 7488/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) My Department has one of the most extensive Carrier Bag levies in the UK as it includes bags of all materials. Northern Ireland is the only jurisdiction in the UK that publishes annual validated statistics and uses the levy proceeds for environmental causes only. Since the introduction of the NI levy in excess of 1.5 billion bags have been removed from circulation and £32m has been reinvested helping make NI cleaner and greener and a better place to live and do business. Our statistics for 2019/20 show a reduction of 13.9% bags from the previous year and a 73.2% reduction from the introduction of the levy, delivering the seventh consecutive year of downward usage trends.
- (ii) The downward bag usage trends across NI are encouraging however, I recognise we still have work to do to continue to change consumer and retailer behaviours. I am concerned that heavy duty reusable bags are now often the only ones

for sale in many outlets and while regularly purchased, they are not reused as often as they should be. Reusable bags are only of environmental benefit if they are actually reused. I am considering how best to proceed with the NI Carrier Bag levy to ensure that it delivers the best outcome for the Northern Ireland environment. Any change to the levy or pricing threshold in NI would require public consultation and new legislation.

- (iii) While I recognise that plastic is a valuable resource and how it plays a huge role in our economy, the high levels of plastic waste in our environment continues to be a global and NI wide concern. I support the Executive's way forward, as outlined in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document which included the commitment to create a plan to eliminate plastic pollution across NI and I have recently signed my Department up to the UK wide Plastics Pact. We need to reduce the amount of plastic that we are using, and we need to ensure that plastic is recycled and reused and does not end up in our oceans or in landfill.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of the recent Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey which shows less than a quarter of our young people feel we are looking after our environment; and (ii) how does he intend to respond to this.

(AQW 7535/17-22)

Mr Poots: I understand that young people in Northern Ireland are invested in, and fully aware of the huge challenges facing our fragile and delicately balanced environment. They appreciate that our world is invaluable, and to their immense credit are willing and eager to play an integral part in dealing with the environmental issues we face as a society today. It is no exaggeration to say that our environment is our biggest asset which provides us, not only with livelihoods but with recreational activities and enjoyment.

By 2023 the world's population will be in excess of 8 billion, and humankind's footprint on the planet is putting unprecedented pressure on resources, food supplies, habitats and our oceans. These challenges must be faced head on, and I recognise that our young people are rightly concerned about these issues, and will play a pivotal role in identifying and acting on solutions so that we can protect, preserve and enhance local and global environments, while maintaining and building upon the social and economic opportunities they provide.

I'm very thankful that today's young people feel their responsibility as the environmental guardians of tomorrow, and I commend young people for their desire to protect and manage our environment in order to sustain it – both its intrinsic value and for the benefits it provides to our own and to future generations. As a society, we have known for some time that it is no longer acceptable to exploit or exhaust the resources nature has provided without a thought for the impact of our actions and what effect they will have both now and in the future, and I feel it is hugely encouraging that protecting and improving our environment is of such vital importance to today's young people.

My Department is fully committed to ensuring young people are engaged in protecting, preserving and safe-guarding our countryside, our wildlife and our environment in its entirety. To this end my Department directly supports Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful (KNIB) which runs a number of programmes, including: Eco-Schools, Live Here, Love Here, Clean Coast, and Adopt-A-Spot, all of which owe their success to the time, effort and commitment of volunteers, including many young volunteers. To date, over £3 million of support has been awarded to KNIB since 2007/08 with additional current funding of over £1 million to further support KNIB's educational & promotional campaigns.

In particular, the Department funded Eco-Schools programme is an excellent platform for educating and informing young people, connecting them to nature and empowering them to create change both locally and globally on our journey towards a sustainable environment. In fact, 100% of Northern Ireland's primary and secondary level schools participate in the Eco-Schools programme – the first place in the world to achieve this feat. It is encouraging to see the strength of the programme continue to grow, and how focused teachers and young people have remained on working towards a sustainable environment even during this pandemic.

Ulster Wildlife, which also receives support through DAERA's Environment Fund, co-ordinates the 'Grassroots Challenge' as a partnership programme with other organisations including KNIB. Programmes such as the 'Grassroots Challenge' and 'Our Bright Future' (also delivered by Ulster Wildlife) assist with our responses to the environmental challenges our young people face, and the skills gained through participation will increase their prospects of obtaining employment in the growing green jobs sector. 'Our Bright Future' is an ambitious and innovative partnership which brings together both the youth and environmental sectors, with a focus on helping our young people gain vital skills and experience and at the same time improve wellbeing.

I'm fully aware that Northern Ireland's environmental and climate change challenges mean it is imperative that we seek effective approaches for engaging young people and greater environmental awareness, knowledge and skills are central to a green recovery from the Covid19 pandemic. That's why I am leading the development of a Green Growth Strategy and delivery framework to transform and grow our economy while protecting our natural assets. This will ensure we play our part in contributing to the UK net zero carbon target by 2050 which will require our economy to transform to a low carbon model. Achieving this will mean greater innovation, improved productivity and knowledgeable, capable, dynamic people, many of whom are the young people of today.

My Department's "Public Discussion" on a future Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland generated a remarkable 2,500 responses reflecting the views of a wide range of citizens and stakeholders from across Northern Ireland, including those of young people. The findings of this exercise will provide key inputs to the draft Environment Strategy which I intend to publish for public consultation in early 2021.

Over the coming decades, these Strategies will play a key role in delivering my Department's vision of sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape, valued by everyone.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail what factors his Department have identified that led to Peatlands Park (Special Area of Conservation UK0030236) exceeding its critical load of nitrogen deposition with a three-year average annual exceedance of 232 per cent.

(AQW 7560/17-22)

Mr Poots: The current maximum nitrogen deposition at the Peatlands Park SAC is 36.4 kgN/ha/yr for the woodland features and 20.2 kgN/ha/yr for the bog habitats. Source attribution data for this site identifies the top 3 emission sources contributing to N deposition as: Livestock (approx. 59%), transboundary imports (approx. 17%) and fertiliser application (4%). Other sources include international shipping and road transport.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, regarding the Basic Payment Scheme, what was the total financial shortfall to farmers as a result of the ending of transition towards a flat rate payment.

(AQW 7609/17-22)

Mr Poots: There is no financial shortfall to farmers in Northern Ireland as the Basic Payment Scheme budget has not changed.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of prosecutions taken for river pollution incidents, in the last three financial years.

(AQW 7661/17-22)

Mr Poots: The number of prosecutions for water pollution incidents in the last three financial years are listed below.

Financial Year	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Number of prosecutions	16	13	15

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he is taking for sufficient legislation ensuring the protection of wildlife is in place after the transition period.

(AQW 7671/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials have revised legislation which originated from our membership of the EU to ensure that it remains operable and that there is no detriment in environmental protection in Northern Ireland after the transition. The main focus of the revision was to ensure that the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) remain operable post transition period and that Northern Ireland maintains a network of protected sites.

The Northern Ireland Protocol also contains several environmental EU regulations that will still have effect in Northern Ireland after the transition period, such as on invasive alien species, leghold traps and control of trade in endangered species.

I am satisfied that there is currently sufficient legislation in place, or coming into force for protection of wildlife after the transition period. In addition, I am content to review the need for additional legislation that may arise after the transition period.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to pollution incidents at rivers, (i) how many; and (ii) what locations have been reported in North Down, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7673/17-22)

Mr Poots: The number of water pollution incidents impacting rivers in the North Down Constituency area in each of the last five years are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Incidents Impacting Rivers in North Down in each of the last five Years

Year	Number of Pollution Incidents
2015	22
2016	14
2017	30
2018	25
2019	18

In relation to water pollution incidents in the North Down Constituency area in the last five years, the river locations where the incidents were confirmed are set out in Table 2 below.

Table 2: River Locations - Incidents Impacting Rivers in North Down in each of the last five Years

Year	River Name	Pollutant
2015	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil
2015	Ballyholme River Bangor	Agriculture
2015	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2015	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil
2015	Bryansburn Bangor	Oil
2015	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Other
2015	Glen River Cultra	Sewage
2015	Portavoe Reservoir Stream	Sewage
2015	Un-named minor waterway Holywood	Sewage
2015	Un-named minor waterway Kinnegar	Sewage
2015	Un-named stream Craigdarragh Road Helens Bay	Agriculture
2015	Un-named stream Craigdarragh Road Helens Bay	Agriculture
2015	Un-named stream Craigdarragh Road Helens Bay	Agriculture
2015	Un-named stream, Craigavad	Agriculture
2015	Un-named Waterway Seahill Road Cultra	Agriculture
2015	Ward Park River Bangor	Sewage
2015	Ward Park River Bangor	Sewage
2015	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2015	Ward Park River Bangor	Oil
2015	Ward Park River Bangor	Suspended Solids
2015	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2015	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2016	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2016	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2016	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2016	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2016	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2016	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil
2016	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2016	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2016	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2016	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Suspended Solids
2016	Crawfordsburn River	Suspended Solids
2016	Crawfordsburn River	Suspended Solids
2016	Un-named minor waterway Helens Bay	Agriculture
2016	Un-named minor waterway Seahill	Agriculture
2017	Ballyhay Burn Donaghadee	Sewage
2017	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2017	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil
2017	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil

Year	River Name	Pollutant
2017	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2017	Ballyholme River Bangor	Other
2017	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2017	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil
2017	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2017	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2017	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2017	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2017	Croft Burn Holywood	Sewage
2017	Un-named Minor Waterway Holywood	Other
2017	Un-named minor waterway Millisle	Suspended Solids
2017	Un-named stream Craigdarragh Road Helens Bay	Agriculture
2017	Un-named stream Craigdarragh Road Helens Bay	Agriculture
2017	Un-named waterway Westburn Crescent Bangor	Sewage
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Oil
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Sewage
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Oil
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Sewage
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Suspended Solids
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Oil
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Sewage
2017	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2018	Ballyholme River Bangor	Other
2018	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil
2018	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2018	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil
2018	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil
2018	Bryansburn Bangor	Oil
2018	Bryansburn Bangor	Sewage
2018	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2018	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2018	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2018	Crawfordsburn River	Other
2018	Crawfordsburn River	Sewage
2018	Crawfordsburn River	Agriculture
2018	Mill Burn Millisle	Agriculture
2018	Un-named minor waterway Hogstown Road Donaghadee	Oil

Year	River Name	Pollutant
2018	Un-named minor waterway Holywood	Sewage
2018	Un-named minor waterway Sheridan Drive Helens Bay	Sewage
2018	Un-named stream, Craigavad	Agriculture
2018	Ward Park River Bangor	Oil
2018	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2018	Ward Park River Bangor	Oil
2018	Ward Park River Bangor	Waste Discharge
2018	Ward Park River Bangor	Sewage
2018	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2018	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2019	Ballyholme River Bangor	Sewage
2019	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil
2019	Ballyholme River Bangor	Oil
2019	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2019	Carnalea Stream Bangor	Sewage
2019	Crawfordsburn River	Sewage
2019	Crawfordsburn River	Oil
2019	Croft Burn Holywood	Sewage
2019	Glen River Cultra	Other
2019	Tillysburn Stream	Sewage
2019	Twizzel Burn Holywood	Sewage
2019	Un-named minor waterway Cannyreagh Road Donaghadee	Sewage
2019	Un-named minor waterway Holywood	Sewage
2019	Un-named stream, Craigavad	Agriculture
2019	Ward Park River Bangor	Other
2019	Ward Park River Bangor	Chemical
2019	Ward Park River Bangor	Oil
2019	Ward Park River Bangor	Oil

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to work with the Minister for the Economy to develop a hemp industry in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7703/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials met with members of the Northern Ireland Hemp Association on 14 February 2020 and provided them with advice on the ways my Department can assist this sector. This included signposting potential support under the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, and information on the services that DAERA's College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute provide that could benefit the industry. In June 2020, CAFRE provided some further information to the Northern Ireland Hemp Association.

I am also aware that my officials have had engagement with the work that Invest NI has been doing to look at the economic potential of industrial hemp.

At present, I have no plans to engage with the Minister for the Economy about the hemp industry in Northern Ireland.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given (i) nitrous oxide makes up 8 per cent of NI emissions compared with 3 per cent of UK-wide emissions; and (ii) its relatively high global warming impact, with a global warming potential of 298 compared with a figure of 1 for carbon dioxide, what his Department's plans are to reduce Northern Ireland's nitrous oxide emissions.

(AQW 7738/17-22)

Mr Poots: Data from the 1990 – 2018 UK greenhouse gas inventory shows that nitrous oxide (N₂O) made up 8% (i.e. 1.5MtCO₂e) of all greenhouse gases within Northern Ireland, while the respective figure for the United Kingdom was 5% (i.e. 20.4 MtCO₂e). Please note, the infographic accompanying the 'NI Greenhouse Gas Statistics 1990-2018' wrongly accredited the percentage composition of N₂O to the values of HFCs and vice versa. This is now corrected¹.

Approximately 90% of NI's N₂O emissions emanate from activities associated with agriculture and land use. In particular, the manufacture and application of nitrogen fertilisers, management of slurry and manures and from natural soil processes.

Measures in place to reduce N₂O include the Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) 2019-2022 Regulations. The NAP applies to all farms and contains a range of control measures on the application of manures and chemical fertilisers to land. In particular, the measures preventing application of manures and fertilisers to wet soils help reduce denitrification and consequent emissions of nitrous oxide.

The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) will continue to provide advice to farmers on reducing greenhouse gases including N₂O. CAFRE is delivering the new Environmental Business Development Group Programme for NI farmers, part of which focuses on N₂O sources and emissions and advice on how to reduce them.

My department is developing a comprehensive strategy to address the ammonia challenge which will propose a series of farm measures to reduce emissions. We intend to publish and consult on these proposals soon.

DAERA will also continue to support the work of the Greenhouse Gas Implementation Partnership as they implement their Efficient Farming Cuts Greenhouse Gases Implementation Plan 2016-20 and work to renew it from 2021.

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-greenhouse-gas-inventory-1990-2018-statistical-bulletin>

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how much money has been spent on Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) monitoring; and (ii) how many full-time equivalent staff have been employed in ASSI condition monitoring, for each financial year from 2009/10 to 2019/20.

(AQW 7741/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department has different teams from Natural Environment and Marine Divisions involved in ASSI condition monitoring. The table below details the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff from 2011/12 to 2018/19, and the approximate cost of these staff carrying out ASSI monitoring each year based on the Department's ready reckoner.

	No NE FTE Staff	Cost based on the Ready Reckoner	No of Marine FTE Staff	Cost based on the Ready Reckoner	Total FTE	Total costs
2011/12	9.7	£ 341,446.47	1.6	£ 51,821.54	11.3	£ 393,268.01
2012/13	9.7	£ 349,982.62	1.6	£ 53,117.07	11.3	£ 403,099.69
2013/14	9.7	£ 356,982.30	1.6	£ 54,179.42	11.3	£ 411,161.72
2014/15	9.7	£ 364,121.95	1.6	£ 55,263.01	11.3	£ 419,384.96
2015/16	9.1	£ 337,091.33	1.6	£ 56,091.95	10.7	£ 393,183.28
2016/17	9.1	£ 341,459.49	1.6	£ 55,125.74	10.7	£ 396,585.23
2017/18	10.1	£ 359,346.81	1.6	£ 57,787.33	11.7	£ 417,134.14
2018/19	8.6	£ 349,856.82	2	£ 74,501.52	10.6	£ 424,358.34
2019/20	11.25	£ 438,425.94	2.6	£ 98,789.56	13.85	£ 537,215.50

The costs for the 2019/20 year are an estimate as the unit that carries out most of the ASSI condition monitoring in Natural Environment Division increased in size to 16 FTE by the end of that financial year, but not all of these staff joined in time to participate in monitoring that year.

The Department's records of staff in post do not date any further back than 2011/12, anything older having been destroyed in line with the Department's retention and disposal schedule.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to outline what 'necessary conservation measures', including site management plans and appropriate statutory, policy and administrative measures, his Department has introduced to avoid the deterioration of natural habitats as required under Article 6(1) and 6(2) of the EU Habitats Directive; and (ii) for his assessment of whether his Department is compliant with the Habitats Directive to 'take appropriate steps to avoid, in the special areas of conservation, the deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species as well as disturbance of the species for which the areas have been designated'.

(AQW 7742/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) My Department has introduced a range of conservation measures to support the achievement of conservation objectives for our suite of European sites, through site-specific management measures under the Environmental Farming Scheme (Higher Level) and the Management Of Sensitive Sites scheme (MOSS). Further management measures are being implemented through the INTERREG VA programmes. These are collectively contributing to the delivery against the PfG target to bring our protected areas under favourable management, management to “correspond to the ecological requirements of the natural habitat type”, as required under Article 6(1) of the EU Habitats Directive. The majority of our European sites are underpinned by ASSI designation, with the associated statutory regulatory and enforcement powers for ensuring their protection and management.
- (ii) The recently published Article 17 report (2019), provides a formal report on implementation of the Habitats Directives. Whilst not specific to my Department, but Northern Ireland as a whole, and to the UK, it indicates that majority of habitat and species features protected under the Directive (both in protected areas and across Northern Ireland where these special habitats and species occur) continue to be in unfavourable conservation status. Whilst this is disappointing, it reflects in part that it takes time for habitats and species to recover to favourable condition, for example, restoration efforts to re-establish native woodland sites or to restore active bog-forming conditions on degraded raised bogs can take many years to show a real improvement.

This formal assessment shows that we have more to do. Going forward, we are continuing the work to complete Conservation Management Plans for our Special Areas of Conservation, to identify the necessary measures and better target all the actions required to improve condition on these sites. This will include working to address wider pressures and threats to biodiversity on our European sites and other priority habitats, such as that posed by excessive nitrogen deposition.

Wider government strategy and delivery plans, for example, the Green Growth Strategy and Delivery Framework I launched earlier this year will also work to address the local challenges our natural environment is facing.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the climate impacts of Waste-to-Energy plants.

(AQW 7744/17-22)

Mr Poots: Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that any waste which is not prevented will have some level of climate impact.

That impact is dependent on various factors and where waste cannot be prevented, there is potential to reduce emissions by diverting waste from landfill to other treatment options. This includes recycling, composting, anaerobic digestion, mechanical biological treatment and incineration with energy recovery. Biodegradable municipal waste (BMW) sent to landfill can create harmful emissions, particularly methane which is a very potent greenhouse gas.

In terms of the climate impact of waste to energy plants there are many variables to consider, such as; the efficiency of the plant, whether they have carbon capture and storage systems and what mix of waste they use as an energy source. All of these have a bearing on their climate impacts.

The Committee on Climate Change report on Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland published in February 2019 highlighted that the role of energy from waste plants to treat BMW diverted from landfill should be assessed. I am therefore continuing to review this type of waste treatment in terms of future waste infrastructure needs for Northern Ireland.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of the status of wild animal circuses in Northern Ireland in comparison to (a) the UK; and (b) Ireland; and (ii) whether he is minded to support a ban on the use of wild animals in circuses.

(AQW 7747/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware that wild animals performing in circuses has been banned in England, Scotland and Wales; and in the Republic of Ireland. There are no circuses based here and the circuses which have travelled to Northern Ireland in recent years have not used any wild animals in their performances.

I support the introduction of a ban here. However, during the last active season, there were no circus performances using wild animals in Northern Ireland. This, coupled with Departmental pressures arising from the need to prepare for the end of the transition period, means that it is unlikely that any legislation to ban wild animals in circuses will be introduced in the near future. My Department will progress this matter when resources permit.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that they were consulted on the issue in May 2020, and that they are the only agency not to have responded to date, for an update on the Natural Environment Division's consultation response to the Glenmóna planning application.

(AQW 7796/17-22)

Mr Poots: This major application at Glenmóna proposes a significant development and as such requires a site visit to ensure that the risks to any Natural Heritage features are fully assessed. Unfortunately, due to Covid 19 site visits by officials were curtailed particularly at the start of the pandemic. Officials are currently working through outstanding site visits as quickly as possible. A visit has been scheduled for Friday 2 October 2020 and a response will issue to the planning authority as soon as possible thereafter.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how his Department is addressing climate change.

(AQW 7840/17-22)

Mr Poots: Climate change is my top priority and I remain fully committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland plays its full part in reducing our greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to our changing climate.

My Department is the lead Department on climate change. DAERA ensures that NI meets the requirements of the UK Climate Change Act and contributes towards Programme for Government outcome 2 'We live and work sustainably protecting the environment'. DAERA also takes the lead in developing an overall UK pathway to Net Zero and ensuring NI participation at the UN Conference of the Parties conference in Glasgow next year.

My Department co-ordinates cross departmental climate change work through the Future Generations Group and its Mitigation and Adaptation Sub Groups. These groups assist us deliver cross government action to reduce Northern Ireland's GHG emissions and adapt to our changing climate.

My officials have also commenced work on scoping the options for the introduction of a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill. I will consider these options along with the advice provided from the CCC and I will present my findings to the Northern Ireland Executive to agree a way forward.

I launched 'Green Growth' at the Assembly in June 2020, outlining my concept for a Green Growth approach for Northern Ireland and recommending economic renewal that recognises the importance of our environment and advocates a pathway to a sustainable future, as part of the recovery from Covid-19.

It is anticipated that a draft Green Growth Strategy and Delivery Framework can be ready for consultation early next year and launched by next spring.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why his Department agreed to a service-level agreement between NI Water and Inland Fisheries to stock Portavoe Reservoir with fish when the reservoir was sold into private ownership.

(AQW 7869/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department signed a Service Level Agreement with Northern Ireland Water in December 2014 that transferred the management of fishing rights for 28 reservoirs to my Department, including Portavoe.

The fishing rights were transferred for set periods of time but with clauses that allowed Northern Ireland Water to sell the reservoirs if they were surplus to their requirements. Portavoe Reservoir was last stocked by the Department on 19th February 2020 with 1000 rainbow trout before its sale to a private owner in June 2020.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why his Department agreed to a service-level agreement between NI Water and Inland Fisheries to stock Portavoe Reservoir with fish when the reservoir site is now sealed off and there is no access to either the public or anglers holding permits to fish.

(AQW 7870/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department signed a Service Level Agreement with Northern Ireland Water in December 2014 to manage fishing rights at 28 reservoirs, including Portavoe.

Portavoe reservoir was last stocked by the Department on 19th February 2020 with 1000 rainbow trout. Portavoe reservoir has not been stocked since the reservoir has been sold in June 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how many cameras are proposed on the structures for which a Certificate of Lawful Use or Development is being sought at Larne Port; (ii) how many new buildings are being sought; and (iii) what is the proposed height of the fences.

(AQW 7917/17-22)

Mr Poots: In respect of the Certificate of Lawful Use or Development sought at Larne Port;

- i. There are no cameras proposed on the structures
- ii. Four separate buildings are proposed
- iii. No fences are proposed

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether any part of the Port of Larne lies within an Area of Special Scientific Interest.

(AQW 8005/17-22)

Mr Poots: It is not possible to answer definitively without knowing what exact area of land that is being referring to. However, examination of the boundary maps for Larne Lough Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) suggests that no part of the Port of Larne lies within an ASSI.

You may wish to view the Department's Natural Environment Map Viewer (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/services/natural-environment-map-viewer>) which is a useful tool for viewing our ASSIs and other protected areas.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when AQW 6267/17-22 will be answered. (AQW 8099/17-22)

Mr Poots: AQW 6267/17-22 was answered on 05 October 2020.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail when (i) the £250,000 scheme of support for inland fishermen who are involved in the Lough Neagh eel and scale-fish fisheries will be finalised; and (ii) payments will be made. (AQW 8207/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am keen to provide support to all the Lough Neagh fishermen and my officials are currently finalising arrangements for the support scheme to be funded under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. The package will be based on income foregone during the time of the pandemic. I am hoping to announce further details shortly.

Payments will be made when completed applications have been submitted and those applications have been assessed to have met the required criteria.

Department for Communities

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what implication the Department for Infrastructure and NI Water's identified water and sewage crisis will have on the target number of new builds needed to meet housing stress. (AQW 6227/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): The potential implications for the development of social housing schemes due to the identified issues affecting the water/sewage infrastructure is a concern for me, particularly given the increasing levels of housing stress.

I understand that presently there are approximately nine schemes at risk due to capacity issues in the water/sewage network. These total more than a thousand social and affordable units over a number of years. I have asked the Housing Executive to carry out a detailed analysis of the areas of housing need that may be impacted by the water infrastructure issue.

My officials have and will continue to engage with the Department for Infrastructure and Housing Executive colleagues to establish options to minimise risks.

My ambition remains to increase the capacity of the Social Housing Development Programme and deliver much needed social homes in areas of most acute housing need.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to outline (i) the actions taken by her Department during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide accommodation for homeless street sleepers; and (ii) the actions her Department is taking to prevent the issue from returning after any temporary measures are withdrawn. (AQW 6229/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: An MOU was set up between my Department, the Housing Executive and DoH. As the statutory body with responsibility for provision of housing, the Housing Executive was best placed to commission necessary accommodation arrangements.

The Housing has advised that as of 8 September it, in conjunction with homeless charities and organisations, has identified 62 individuals who were rough sleeping. These individuals were engaged with and assisted to avail of temporary accommodation and support.

These individuals were placed in temporary accommodation, including homeless supported accommodation, B&B/Hotels, single lets and a House of Multiple occupation (HMO). All placements have been made with the aim of providing the most suitable type of accommodation that is sensitive to the extreme vulnerabilities that are often present amongst rough sleepers.

A number of those sleeping rough had no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and were ineligible for housing assistance. In the context of maintaining adherence to current public health advice on social distancing, self-isolation or shielding, DoH agreed to fund the provision of accommodation for these individuals during the period of the current emergency.

- (i) My Department and the Housing Executive are currently assessing and evaluating the measures put in place to address homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis. This will inform our future homeless policy as we look to improve our response to homelessness

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities to detail the successful appeal rate to Personal Independent Payment reviews by claimants residing in the North Down constituency, in each year since its introduction.

(AQW 6277/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department does not hold information on the number of Personal Independent Payment appeals received per constituency or the success rate of a Personal Independent Payment appeal by constituency.

However, the number of successful Personal Independence Payment appeals as a percentage of all the Personal Independence Payment appeals received are set out in the table below:

Year	Total Number of PIP Appeals Received	Total Number of Successful PIP Appeals	% of PIP Appeals that were successful
2016/2017*	4,874	9	0.2%
2017/2018	7,329	1,467	20.0%
2018/2019	8,752	3,088	35.3%
2019/2020	5,473	4,183	76.4%
Total	26,428	8,747	33.1%

* PIP came into effect in June 2016, replacing Disability Living Allowance.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities (i) to list the sites where her Department and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive have expressed an interest through the D1 Process; (ii) to list the sites where housing associations have expressed an interest through the D1 Process in developing lands for social or affordable housing; and (iii) to provide an update on the progress in relation to each of those sites.

(AQW 6379/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: During the 3 year period (1st April 2017 until 31st March 2020) the Housing Executive expressed interest in the development of the sites in Table 1, which were trawled via the Surplus Public Sector Sites Disposal (D1) Process, for the provision of social housing.

Where a site has been nominated for the provision of social housing I have provided an update.

During the same 3 year period Housing Associations expressed an interest in the following surplus sites outlined in Table 2. An update has been provided for those sites that have been taken forward for development of affordable housing.

The D1 Surplus Disposal process is undertaken by Land and Property Services. Their Central Advisor Unit will circulate to all internal market bodies, of which the Housing Executive is one, any available assets.

Table 1 Sites where Department and the Housing Executive have expressed an interest through the D1 Process

Site	Status
Former Vere Foster Primary School site Moyard Parade Belfast	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
Ex Military Site, Main Street, Forkhill	Nominated to Radius. HA in discussion with DfC regarding development of third phase of housing.
Governor's Road, Lisburn	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
Ballykeigle Primary School, Ballykeigle Road, Comber	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
Moylinney, 37 Ballyalton Park, Newtownabbey	Nominated to Radius. Accepted. Onsite March 2020.
Ballybeen Square	Nominated to Choice. Accepted. Onsite March 2019.
Dan's Road, Ballymena	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
7 Limavady Road, Derry	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
Land at Regent Street/Clifton Street, Belfast	Discussions held with Choice over acquisition of land – dependent on third party private lands to produce viable social housing scheme.
2 Shore Road Greenisland (D1 Trawl)	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.

Site	Status
4-6 Killane Road, Limavady	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
Hospital Road, Newry	Nomination initially refused by two housing associations. Currently being offered out to all housing associations for expressions of interest.
Tyrone and County Hospital, 14-26 Hospital Road, Omagh	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
Ballymoney Music Centre, 23 Charles Street, Ballymoney	Nominated to Radius. Accepted. In the SHDP for delivery in 2021/22.
Former Kearns & Murtagh Yard, Newry	Nominated to Clanmil. Feasibility studies still ongoing.
9-11 Mount Crescent, Downpatrick	Limited housing put-back. Not viable for development.
529 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
Former Newtownabbey High School, Newtownabbey	Nominated to Apex Housing. Accepted. In the SHDP for delivery in 2021/22.
306 Antrim Road, Belfast	Asset owner went to open market to achieve disposal target.
Craigmore Way, Newry	To be nominated to Apex Housing to amalgamate into their programmed Scheme at Craigmore Way.
Land at Station Road, Armagh	Asset owner went to open market to achieve disposal target.
The Diamond, Londonderry	Interest subsequently withdrawn – continued use of building for office purposes.
13-15 The Square, Ballynahinch	Nominated to Habinteg Housing. Accepted. In the SHDP for 2020/21.
5 Ballynoe Road, Downpatrick	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
Mountsandel Road, Coleraine	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
Lands at Ballynamoney Lane, Lurgan	Discussions on-going with DfC/NIHE about potential partial use of site for social housing
8 Crawford Square, L'derry	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
Fairhill View, Belfast	Interest expressed for car parking purposes (not for social housing scheme).
Play Park at Patrick Street, Newry (Raymond McCreesh Play Park)	Nominated to Choice Housing. Accepted. Feasibility studies still ongoing.
Ballysillan Park, Crumlin Road, Belfast	Site to be incorporated in Urban Villages Environmental Improvement Scheme
York Road, PSNI Station, 60-78 York Road, Belfast	Interest subsequently withdrawn – site not feasible for social housing.
17 Coast Road, Cushendall	Potential joint approach investigated with DTNI. Other sites in Cushendall subsequently being progressed by housing associations.
141-147 Upper Dunmurry Lane, Belfast	Land only suitable for development in conjunction with third party private lands which could not be secured for social housing.
19/21a Edward Street, Portadown	Nominated to Clanmil. Feasibility studies still ongoing.

Site	Status
2 Cecil Street, Newry	Nomination initially refused by a housing association. Currently being offered out to all housing associations for expressions of interest.
Killyrammer Community Centre, Ballymoney	Nominated to Triangle Housing. Accepted. Feasibility studies ongoing.

Table 2 Sites where housing associations have expressed an interest through the D1 Process in developing lands for social or affordable housing

Site	Status
5 St Mark's Place, Armagh	Sold on open market June 2017. i) Expression of Interest from DfC, ii) on behalf of Clanmil for affordable housing
Former Ballynafeigh PSNI Station, Belfast	Sold on open market in December 2016. i) Expression of Interest from DfC, ii) on behalf of Clanmil for affordable housing
Hightown Industrial Estate, Newtownabbey	Sold Jan 2020 on open market i) Expression of interest from NIHE, ii) for social and / or affordable Housing
B- Met Campus Tower Street, Belfast	Sold to CHOICE in Jan 2018. i) Expression of Interest from DfC, ii) on behalf of Choice for affordable housing
Former PSNI station - Castlederg	Interest withdraw
Former PSNI station - Moira	Sold open market in December 2019. i) Expression of interest from DfC, ii) on behalf of Choice for affordable housing
Former PSNI station - Willowfield, Belfast	Sold to Choice Aug 2018 i) Expression of interest from DfC, ii) on behalf of Choice for affordable housing
19 Stranmillis Road/12 Malone Road, Belfast	Interest Withdrawn
County Buildings, 15 East Bridge Street, Enniskillen	Interest Withdrawn
Gainsborough/Mountcollyer and Lawnbrook, Belfast	Interest Withdrawn
Lissue Road Industrial Estate, Lisburn	Sale Agreed on Open market i) Expression of interest from DfC, ii) on behalf of Apex for affordable housing
20 Beechill Road, Belfast	Interest Withdrawn
Beechlands Camlough	Interest Withdrawn
Ulster cottages Strabane	Interest Withdrawn
Tullycarnett PS	Interest Withdrawn
St Malachys school	Interest Withdrawn
Land at Summerhill Road, Twinbrook	Interest Withdrawn
Land at Lower Clonard Street	Interest Withdrawn
Posnett Street, Belfast, BT7 1JR	Interest Withdrawn

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the amount of funding her Department has invested in each parliamentary constituency in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7039/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Voluntary and Community sector

Funding in relation to grants to the voluntary and community sector, broken down by constituency in each of the last five years, can be found at Annex A. This information has been provided through the Government Funding Database.

Housing

Housing investment, broken down by constituency in each of the last five years, is detailed as follows:

- Building Successful Communities in Annex B;
- Housing Association spend for intermediate shared ownership housing in Annex C; and

- Shared Housing funding for the development and delivery of the shared schemes' Good Relations Plans in Annex D.

Please note that information in relation to investment via ALBs (i.e. the Housing Executive) is not included in this response as information is not normally recorded by parliamentary constituency.

Urban Regeneration

Where possible, information has been provided by parliamentary constituency at Annex E. Where this has not been possible, the information has been provided by the relevant council area.

Annex A - Grants to Voluntary & Community Sector

Constituency Name	Area (Sqkm)	Code	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Total by Constituency (2015 - 2020):
Belfast East	55.30	N06000001	£14,420,895.52	£14,958,736.24	£11,999,554.33	£14,203,601.47	£6,566,478.30	£62,149,265.86
Belfast North	50.32	N06000002	£34,706,504.97	£39,998,292.58	£41,760,690.61	£35,386,400.30	£36,657,598.13	£188,509,486.59
Belfast South	44.83	N06000003	£63,317,109.20	£66,905,085.78	£48,020,977.75	£73,474,160.65	£35,561,361.65	£287,278,695.03
Belfast West	45.15	N06000004	£10,233,148.81	£9,472,154.05	£10,796,600.50	£8,742,737.11	£6,719,658.93	£45,964,299.40
East Antrim	593.04	N06000005	£1,305,799.73	£1,449,121.85	£1,284,301.61	£1,134,263.82	£759,943.37	£5,933,430.38
East Londonderry	1275.27	N06000006	£1,927,197.41	£2,368,759.80	£1,471,743.58	£1,591,739.53	£1,240,742.89	£8,600,183.21
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	2506.01	N06000007	£5,751,929.12	£3,625,354.88	£3,100,056.44	£4,160,042.85	£8,991,532.73	£25,628,916.02
Foyle	183.64	N06000008	£36,913,385.44	£30,169,415.41	£44,151,472.62	£50,580,473.77	£62,363,162.85	£224,177,910.09
Lagan Valley	467.84	N06000009	£244,335.70	£396,108.13	£294,412.68	£431,831.90	£392,192.28	£1,758,880.69
Mid Ulster	1348.64	N06000010	£2,090,067.19	£2,396,535.59	£1,281,091.79	£1,587,984.06	£615,953.17	£7,971,631.80
Newry and Armagh	1081.52	N06000011	£3,060,324.70	£4,252,850.53	£2,795,881.14	£2,535,484.21	£1,039,155.11	£13,683,695.69
North Antrim	1386.24	N06000012	£6,550,395.22	£10,438,864.44	£9,028,842.85	£14,919,608.69	£19,307,448.96	£60,245,160.16
North Down	115.44	N06000013	£33,824,734.36	£30,647,664.93	£27,584,242.81	£8,373,679.59	£12,188,256.36	£112,618,578.05
South Antrim	785.03	N06000014	£2,953,803.98	£2,822,690.70	£3,037,119.81	£2,946,306.35	£637,897.56	£12,397,818.40
South Down	1249.82	N06000015	£1,573,743.28	£1,941,902.32	£1,881,073.50	£1,722,010.31	£245,056.05	£7,363,785.46
Strangford	655.23	N06000016	£961,859.57	£1,295,314.92	£1,012,091.22	£875,923.58	£511,755.37	£4,656,944.66
Upper Bann	479.69	N06000017	£2,068,849.13	£5,011,816.86	£7,730,998.06	£3,351,866.50	£6,189,100.27	£24,352,630.82
West Tyrone	1992.09	N06000018	£1,718,007.09	£2,074,363.31	£2,920,800.42	£4,045,427.61	£3,103,144.99	£13,861,743.42
Northern Ireland Total:			£223,622,090.42	£230,225,032.32	£220,151,951.72	£230,063,542.30	£203,090,438.96	£1,107,153,055.72

Annex B - Building Successful Communities

Constituency	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast North	£ 612,590.65	£ 123,826.02	£ 43,042.00	£ 35,205.82	£ 147,627.14
Belfast West	£ 942,495.26	£ 519,617.43	£ 155,300.13	£ 88,738.92	£ 123,414.81
North Antrim	£ 403,644.49	£ 422,280.00	£ 89,976.75	£ 9,132.00	£ 266,270.02

Annex C - Intermediate Shared Ownership Housing

Constituency	Financial Year 2015/16	Financial Year 2016/17	Financial Year 2017/18	Financial Year 2018/19	Financial Year 2019/20
Belfast East	£2,946,260	£1,807,190	£2,309,000	£1,947,000	£2,384,000
Belfast North	£1,603,380	£3,704,000	£1,530,000	£2,671,000	£2,723,000
Belfast South	£2,206,760	£12,181,000	£1,064,000	£700,000	£1,127,000
Belfast West	£2,856,760	£2,284,000	£2,431,190	£1,737,000	£2,233,000
East Antrim	£1,851,190	£937,000	£1,114,000	£2,023,000	£1,541,000

Constituency	Financial Year 2015/16	Financial Year 2016/17	Financial Year 2017/18	Financial Year 2018/19	Financial Year 2019/20
East Londonderry	£711,000	£488,000	£696,000	£905,000	£1,383,000
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	£1,589,000	£1,019,000	£943,000	£1,612,000	£1,469,000
Foyle	£513,000	£219,000	£414,000	£1,017,000	£630,000
Lagan Valley	£4,614,160	£3,020,000	£3,055,000	£3,336,270	£4,597,320
Mid Ulster	£1,049,260	£829,000	£923,000	£2,311,000	£2,822,000
Newry & Armagh	£999,000	£778,000	£1,122,000	£1,723,000	£1,329,000
North Antrim	£2,179,000	£1,956,000	£1,325,000	£2,018,000	£1,857,000
North Down	£3,766,000	£2,228,000	£3,429,000	£3,453,000	£3,580,000
South Antrim	£5,100,000	£2,476,000	£2,817,000	£3,629,000	£4,238,000
South Down	£1,244,000	£860,000	£1,299,000	£2,198,000	£1,279,000
Strangford	£2,834,000	£1,928,000	£2,130,000	£2,762,000	£2,952,000
Upper Bann	£5,879,000	£3,909,000	£4,300,000	£4,986,000	£5,021,000
West Tyrone	£334,000	£332,000	£263,000	£263,000	£420,000

Annex D - Good Relations Support Funding

Parliamentary Constituency	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21
Belfast North	£497,675	£497,675	£0.00	£92,838	£371,355	£0.00
Belfast South	£880,880	£1,179,766	£0.00	£0.00	£298,886	£0.00
East Londonderry	£0.00	£0.00	£154,052	£0.00	£221,923	£154,051
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	£0.00	£0.00	£230,470	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Foyle	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£86,335	£0.00	£0.00
Mid Ulster	£261,560	£261,560	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Newry and Armagh	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£149,197	£102,040	£0.00
North Antrim	£0.00	£172,516	£0.00	£234,733	£0.00	£0.00
North Down	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£76,074	£0.00
South Antrim	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£67,212	£0.00	£0.00
South Down	£0.00	£97,078	£0.00	£182,612	£0.00	£0.00
Strangford	£0.00	£180,062	£65,526	£114,536	£0.00	£0.00
Upper Bann	£0.00	£171,739	£0.00	£0.00	£171,739	£0.00
West Tyrone	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£74,472	£180,024	£0.00

Annex E

Constituency Name	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Total by Constituency (2015 - 2020):
Belfast East	£946,292.53	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£946,292.53
Belfast North	£5,656,022.07	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£5,656,022.07
Belfast West	£117,339.17	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£117,339.17
East Antrim	£536,144	£1,292,116	£114,396	£560,613	£408,255	£2,911,524.00

Constituency Name	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Total by Constituency (2015 - 2020):
East Londonderry	£406,163.00	£1,225,323	£1,292,205	£6,120,887	£3,725,755	£12,770,333.00
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	£6,737,850.75	£520,000.00	£161,369.00	£481,995.31	£1,885,600.00	£9,786,815.06
Foyle	£4,636,714.16	£2,536,215.68	£1,609,646.60	£3,047,956.37	£1,695,789.35	£13,526,322.16
Lagan Valley	£403,712	£289,598	£219,366	£449,405	£777,755	£2,139,836.00
Mid Ulster	£2,849,940.65	£2,476,382.43	£65,433.70	£160,706.00	£2,307,344.00	£7,859,806.78
Newry And Armagh	£1,075,911	£801,069	£511,421	£31,431	£542,256	£2,962,088.00
North Antrim	£2,002,756	£231,327	£569,024	£624,037	£3,122,303	£6,549,447.00
North Down	£1,018,386	£1,188,957	£843,518	£131,276	£68,098	£3,250,235.00
South Antrim	£1,307,279	£806,458	£566,837	£2,230	£425,127	£3,107,931.00
South Down	£201,305	£1,871,537	£1,052,617	£56,648	£446,919	£3,629,026.00
Sperrin	£537,146.72	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£537,146.72
Strangford	£2,741,682	£470,197	£465,491	£76,410	£22,190	£3,775,970.00
Upper Bann	£2,598,758	£463,650	£1,710,371	£96,910	£290,102	£5,159,790.81
West Tyrone	£604,897.42	£289,926.57	£61,449.24	£227,745.55	£489,503.48	£1,673,522.26
Multiple Constituency	£311,822.06	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£311,822.06
Belfast City Council Area *	£6,558,192	£6,893,909	£2,875,902	£4,452,783	£9,089,489	£29,870,275.00
Northern Ireland Total:	£41,248,313.34	£21,356,665.68	£12,119,046.54	£16,521,033.23	£25,296,485.83	£116,541,544.62

*where it is not possible to disaggregate to parliamentary constituency level

Mr Catney asked the Minister for Communities how much her Department has spent facilitating staff working from home. (AQW 7043/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In order to ensure the continued delivery of key benefit services to vulnerable customers the Department for Communities has invested c£7.5m in the procurement of portable IT devices to enable its staff to work remotely, either in other office locations or at home. This investment is critical to ensure resilience for the organisation and provide continuity of services in the event of a further wave of Covid 19 or other contingency situation. The investment in these portable devices is also of long-term strategic value to the department in providing much greater flexibility in responding to the needs of customers.

In addition to this investment the department has incurred internal staff costs to have some existing fixed IT equipment adapted for home working use as well as delivery costs of c£187.5k.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to make the increase to the standard allowance of Universal Credit permanent. (AQW 7094/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The standard allowance of Universal Credit (and working tax credit) has been increased for this financial year by £1,040 per year (£20 a week). This is in addition to the annual uprating of 1.7%. This means that for a single Universal Credit claimant aged 25 or over, the standard allowance will increase from £317.82 to £409.89 per month. This is the first increase in benefit entitlement in 5 years.

This matter will be kept under review.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to expand the Affordable Warmth scheme. (AQW 7182/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A budget of £12m has been allocated to the Affordable Warmth Scheme for the year 2020/21. This level of funding will improve the energy efficiency of almost 2,700 low income households.

The Scheme is delivered in partnership between my Department, Local Councils and the Housing Executive. Since its introduction in September 2014 my Department has invested just under £77m to improve the energy efficiency of 20,710 low income households. The Scheme has business case approval to run until March 2024.

I have recently approved some changes to the eligibility criteria for the Affordable Warmth Scheme in relation to increasing the income threshold from £20,000 to £23,000 and removing disability benefits from the calculation of income for the Scheme. Work is now ongoing to amend the relevant Scheme regulations and these changes to scheme eligibility will then be implemented.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how many personal independence payment (PIP) medical assessments have been carried out by CAPITA since the introduction of PIP; and how many appointments have been cancelled and rearranged by (i) the claimant; and (ii) CAPITA, during this time.

(AQW 7225/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Personal Independence Payment (PIP) assessments are carried out by Capita. Since the introduction of the PIP in June 2016 to the end of August 2020 there has been 215,074 assessments. During the same time period the number of appointments that have been cancelled and rearranged by the customer is 43,541 and by Capita is 22,030.

Where possible, if Capita cancel an appointment, they contact the customer in advance of the originally scheduled date to reschedule.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities why libraries have discontinued the ability to search for family history and records of ancestors.

(AQW 7343/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Libraries NI (LNI) continues to support family history research. The ability of library users to search for family history and the records of ancestors is available via a range of relevant websites all of which can be accessed from the LNI website:

<https://www.librariesni.org.uk/Services/Heritage/Pages/Useful-heritage-websites.aspx>

LNI Cultural Heritage staff also use social media platforms to promote heritage resources which, during lockdown restrictions, include weekly Twitter chats and Facebook posts. The LNI enquiries telephone line and email service are also available to respond to any queries and help signpost users to a range of resources which may support their research needs.

Additional resources for researching family history are also available at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). PRONI reopened to the public on 24 August 2020 and facilitates free access to a range of sources that can be used for family history, including records from churches, schools, estate rentals, Board of Guardians, and various nineteenth century census substitutes. PRONI also provides a range of resources online including searchable databases for valuation registers, will transcriptions, street indexes and digitised historic maps.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how many complaints have been received about CAPITA Personal Independence Payment medical assessments.

(AQW 7377/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Personal Independence Payment (PIP) assessments are carried out by Capita. The table below shows the number of complaints received by Capita in relation to delivering this service.

Since June 2016 go live	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 (Jan to Aug)	Total
Stage 1 - Complaints	78	839	1,026	772	245	2960
Stage 2 - Complaints	7	155	228	182	50	622
Total	85	994	1,254	954	295	3582
Assessments Completed	5,503	57,530	79,962	51,037	21,042	215,074
% of Stage 1 Complaints against assessments completed	1.4%	1.5%	1.3%	1.5%	1.2%	1.4%

Where a customer isn't happy with Capita's response to their complaint (Stage 1) it is escalated to a Stage 2 complaint and another investigation is conducted by Capita.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the Affordable Warmth Scheme budget in each of the last three years, broken down by spend in each constituency.

(AQW 7378/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Budget and actual spend for the Affordable Warmth Scheme for the last 3 years is shown in the table below.

Affordable Warmth Scheme

	Budget	Actual Spend
Year	£'000	£'000
2019/20	11,550	£12,331
2018/19	15,000	£14,542
2017/18	17,800	£18,245

The Housing Executive administers the Affordable Warmth Scheme on behalf of the Department for Communities. It works in partnership with Councils to deliver the scheme. The Housing Executive does not record spend on a constituency basis. In the year 2019/20 the Housing Executive introduced a breakdown by Council area, which is detailed in the table below.

Council	2019/20 (£)
Antrim and Newtownabbey	929,374
Ards and North Down	1,085,378
Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	1,014,081
Belfast	1,115,808
Causeway Coast and Glens	1,268,040
Derry City and Strabane	1,208,464
Fermanagh and Omagh	1,212,709
Lisburn and Castlereagh	1,135,145
Mid and East Antrim	947,586
Mid Ulster	1,282,401
Newry Mourne and Down	1,132,395
Total	£12,331,381

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the departmental funding awarded to community groups in West Tyrone, in each month of the last three years.

(AQW 7443/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The funding awarded to community groups in West Tyrone over the last three years is set out in the table below:

2017/18	£2,922,231.70
2018/19	£4,236,953.40
2019/20	£3,554,054.40

As the Government Funding Database records these awards by Financial Year only, the Department does not hold this information in terms of monthly funding awards.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the (i) allocated Northern Ireland Housing Executive maintenance budget and; (ii) total maintenance spend, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7463/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The table below details the Housing Executive maintenance budget and total maintenance spend for financial years 2015/16 to 2019/20.

		2015/16 £k	2016/17 £k	2017/18 £k	2018/19 £k	2019/20 £k
Planned Maintenance	Actual	54,063	41,971	38,180	40,885	32,585
	Budget	57,065	58,741	53,370	44,617	46,804
Cyclical Maintenance	Actual	35,771	35,436	39,986	48,264	49,334
	Budget	42,065	42,793	43,684	49,984	58,496
Response Void Apd Maintenance	Actual	44,889	42,390	44,544	50,184	52,672
	Budget	41,780	41,724	42,680	46,836	53,592
Revenue Maintenance Total	Actual	134,723	119,797	122,710	139,332	134,591
	Budget	140,911	143,258	139,734	141,438	158,892
	Variance	6,187	-23,461	-17,024	-2,106	-24,301
Stock Improvements	Actual	8,776	21,763	30,733	26,038	8,749
	Budget	8,950	30,780	53,229	34,342	21,520
Adaptations for Persons Disabled	Actual	7,280	6,979	8,579	12,329	12,847
	Budget	7,338	7,351	8,892	11,052	11,920
Capital Improvements Total	Actual	16,056	28,742	39,312	38,366	21,595
	Budget	16,288	38,131	62,121	45,394	33,440
	Variance	-231	-9,389	-22,809	-7,027	-11,845
Maintenance & Improvement	Actual	150,780	148,539	162,022	177,699	156,187
	Budget	157,198	181,389	201,855	186,832	192,332
	Variance	-6,418	-32,850	-39,833	-9,133	-36,145

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how many complaints have been received about the quality of Northern Ireland Housing Executive maintenance, over the last three years; and how many of the complaints were upheld.

(AQW 7464/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the table below which details the breakdown of formal complaints received by the Housing Executive in the last 3 years (24 September 2017 - 24 September 2020) about maintenance and the outcomes, including those complaints that were upheld.

Complaints Stage	Number of complaints	Upheld	Partially upheld	Not upheld	Ongoing
Stage 1	219	56	118	43	2
Stage 2	44	4	21	17	2
NIPSO	17	2	4	10	1
Total	280	62	143	70	5

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties in each constituency that are currently vacant; and the reason for the vacancy.

(AQW 7465/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Please see the tables below that have been provided by the Housing Executive. They detail the number of void properties and show the reasons for the properties being vacant.

Belfast East

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
4	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
1	Decant Adaptation

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
5	Decant Improvement Scheme
9	Difficult to Let
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
17	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
2	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
12	Lettable
26	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
1	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
0	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
39	Terminated Lettable
116	Total

Belfast North

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
3	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
1	Decant Adaptation
13	Decant Improvement Scheme
24	Difficult to Let
71	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
33	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
3	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
3	Lettable
30	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
40	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
1	Sale Pending (Habitable)
4	Occupied by Squatter
29	Terminated Lettable
255	Total

Belfast South

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
28	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
3	Decant Adaptation

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
11	Decant Improvement Scheme
9	Difficult to Let
6	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
9	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
1	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
11	Lettable
11	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
3	Major Change of Tenancy Works
1	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
0	Sale Pending (Habitable)
1	Occupied by Squatter
32	Terminated Lettable
126	Total

Belfast West

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
42	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
0	Decant Adaptation
0	Decant Improvement Scheme
6	Difficult to Let
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
4	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
9	Lettable
4	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
9	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
0	Sale Pending (Habitable)
1	Occupied by Squatter
0	Terminated Lettable
75	Total

East Antrim

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
2	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
1	Decant Adaptation

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
3	Decant Improvement Scheme
8	Difficult to Let
29	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
25	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
0	Lettable
0	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
13	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
2	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
4	Terminated Lettable
87	Total

East Londonderry

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
9	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
7	Decant Adaptation
2	Decant Improvement Scheme
6	Difficult to Let
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
3	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
3	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
0	Lettable
0	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
0	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
0	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
14	Terminated Lettable
44	Total

Fermanagh/South Tyrone

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
1	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
4	Decant Adaptation

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
1	Decant Improvement Scheme
14	Difficult to Let
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
0	Lettable
2	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
4	Major Change of Tenancy Works
1	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
4	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
3	Terminated Lettable
34	Total

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
15	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
6	Decant Adaptation
0	Decant Improvement Scheme
9	Difficult to Let
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
1	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
2	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
0	Lettable
9	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
2	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
0	Sale Pending (Habitable)
1	Occupied by Squatter
9	Terminated Lettable
54	Total

Lagan Valley

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
3	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
2	Decant Adaptation
0	Decant Improvement Scheme

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
0	Difficult to Let
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
17	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
1	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
17	Lettable
6	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
1	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
0	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
48	Terminated Lettable
95	Total

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
3	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
2	Decant Adaptation
0	Decant Improvement Scheme
8	Difficult to Let
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
2	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
0	Lettable
1	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
3	Major Change of Tenancy Works
1	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
1	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
0	Terminated Lettable
21	Total

Newry and Armagh

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
2	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
0	Decant Adaptation
1	Decant Improvement Scheme
5	Difficult to Let

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
4	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
1	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
1	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
4	Lettable
11	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
5	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
1	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
7	Terminated Lettable
42	Total

North Antrim

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
24	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
4	Decant Adaptation
11	Decant Improvement Scheme
2	Difficult to Let
1	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
30	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
2	Lettable
14	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
2	Major Change of Tenancy Works
4	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
2	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
12	Terminated Lettable
108	Total

North Down

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
0	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
4	Decant Adaptation
1	Decant Improvement Scheme
10	Difficult to Let

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
2	Lettable
5	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
0	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
0	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
15	Terminated Lettable
37	Total

South Antrim

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
13	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
1	Decant Adaptation
1	Decant Improvement Scheme
7	Difficult to Let
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
3	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
4	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
12	Lettable
6	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
22	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
0	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
7	Terminated Lettable
76	Total

South Down

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
0	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
2	Decant Adaptation
2	Decant Improvement Scheme
1	Difficult to Let

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
1	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
0	Lettable
11	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
0	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
0	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
17	Terminated Lettable
34	Total

Strangford

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
2	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
4	Decant Adaptation
0	Decant Improvement Scheme
6	Difficult to Let
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
1	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
1	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
4	Lettable
19	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
0	Major Change of Tenancy Works
6	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
2	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
24	Terminated Lettable
69	Total

Upper Bann

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
8	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
1	Decant Adaptation
4	Decant Improvement Scheme
8	Difficult to Let

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
12	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
4	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
0	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
0	Lettable
0	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
4	Major Change of Tenancy Works
1	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
1	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
15	Terminated Lettable
58	Total

West Tyrone

No. of Voids	Reason for Void
4	Pending Demolition (Blocked-Uninhabitable)
1	Decant Adaptation
0	Decant Improvement Scheme
19	Difficult to Let
0	Pending Demolition (Not Blocked-Habitable)
5	Exceptional Circumstances (Habitable)
1	Exceptional Circumstances (Uninhabitable)
0	Fire Damage (Accidental)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Habitable)
0	Transfer to Housing Association (Uninhabitable)
0	Lettable
9	Planned Improvement Scheme (Habitable)
6	Major Change of Tenancy Works
0	Sale Pending (Uninhabitable)
2	Sale Pending (Habitable)
0	Occupied by Squatter
3	Terminated Lettable
50	Total

Total number of voids across all parliamentary constituencies: 1381

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 6276/17-22, whether she has the legislative power to amend the Six Month Rule for Terminal Illness in the Personal Independence Payments process for Northern Ireland. (AQW 7489/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The provisions relating to terminal illness for Personal Independence Payment are set out in Article 87 of the Welfare Reform Order 2015. The legislative power to amend this provision rests with my Department. However, where changes in social security provision would break parity with Britain and have additional costs the issue becomes a matter for wider Executive consideration.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether plans to permanently increase the standard allowance of Universal Credit.

(AQW 7512/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would refer the member to my previous response to AQW 7094/17-22 which he tabled on 17 September 2020.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has carried out research to indicate the impact of Universal Credit on women from disadvantaged areas.

(AQW 7514/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The information that the department holds on gender for those claiming Universal Credit cannot be readily extracted from departmental computer systems in the format requested without specific manual intervention.

The department has been working to ensure that this information is made available in a format that will facilitate bulk analysis as soon as possible. Additional data such as this will be subject to rigorous statistical procedures and quality assurance processes and will then be released as official statistics on the department's website.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities how many Housing Executive homes were empty for the period January 2020 to September 2020.

(AQW 7517/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As of the 1st September 2020, there was a total of 456 properties that had been vacant from or prior to the 1st January 2020 and remained vacant for the full period in question (January 2020 to September 2020).

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities how many requests were received for a Mandatory Reconsideration of a Personal Independence Payment decision since its commencement; and how many of the original decisions were changed.

(AQW 7518/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The most recent Personal Independence Payment statistics were published on 26 August 2020 and covered the period from the introduction of PIP on 20 June 2016 up to 31 May 2020.

The IT system used to administer PIP records Mandatory Reconsideration (MR) outcomes by award changed and award unchanged. The number of MR requests received between June 2016 and 31 May 2020 was 63,960 and the number where the award was changed for the same period was 12,000 (figures rounded to the nearest 10).

Virtually all decisions are changed because additional evidence is provided at the reconsideration stage, which was not available to the officer who made the initial decision.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) successful; and (ii) unsuccessful Personal Independence Payment appeals in the Upper Bann constituency, in each year since its introduction.

(AQW 7519/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department does not hold information on the number of appeals per constituency but holds information on appeal receipts per town (Annex A). My department does not hold information on the number of successful/unsuccessful appeals per constituency or town. I have provided the successful/unsuccessful rate for Personal Independence Payments since its introduction (Annex B).

Annex A - Personal Independent Payment Appeal Receipts

Venue	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	Apr-Jun 2020
Armagh	36	156	96	140	10
Ballymena	68	351	933	271	17
Ballymoney	19	114	132	80	5
Banbridge	27	129	189	107	5
Belfast	533	2,811	3,644	2,218	115
Coleraine	52	288	297	156	11
Cookstown	25	94	125	71	2
Craigavon	73	400	518	363	10
Downpatrick	41	342	471	210	10
Dungannon	49	303	341	214	10
Enniskillen	63	292	339	183	10

Venue	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	Apr-Jun 2020
Limavady	37	91	73	70	4
Londonderry	163	605	469	336	9
Magherafelt	23	153	167	95	0
Newry	72	391	465	291	12
Newtownards	82	417	464	329	14
Omagh	46	282	306	232	8
Strabane	31	152	157	144	2
Total	1,440	7,371	8,752	5,510	254

It should be noted that not all cases lodged in a business year are heard in that same business year.

Annex B - Successful/unsuccessful rate for Personal Independence Payments

Year	Successful	Unsuccessful
2016/17	9	16
2017/18	1,467	1,384
2018/19	3,091	2,082
2019/20	3,779	2,201
1 April 2020 – 31 August 2020*	47	42
Total	8,393	5,725

* As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, no appeals were listed for hearings between 18 March 2020 and 6 July 2020. Since then a limited number of appeals have been listed for hearing.

The difference between the number of appeal receipts (Annex A) and the successful/unsuccessful appeals (Annex B) is a combination of outstanding caseload and withdrawn appeals.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities whether they will commit to continued support for the European Solidarity Corps programme in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7573/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme is a European Union initiative, managed by the Erasmus+ National Agency. Continuance of this programme due to Brexit is uncertain at this time.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities what plans exist to increase the uptake levels of the Contingency Fund among Universal Credit claimants.

(AQW 7587/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: To help increase an uptake of applications to the Universal Credit contingency fund each person who makes a new claim to Universal Credit is individually advised of the availability of the Universal Credit Contingency Fund and how to apply via their Universal Credit journal.

The journal entry includes the Finance Support Freephone number and provides a link to the online application form.

Further information on the Universal Credit Contingency Fund is also available on the Extra Finance Support and Universal Credit pages on NI Direct.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether amateur artists will be able to resume musical activity and follow the same COVID-19 guidelines as professionals.

(AQW 7589/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The current advice for professional and non-professional musicians is contained in the Arts Council publication – In a Bubble of Our Own Making: <http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/images/uploads/publications-documents/In-the-Bubble-of-Our-Making-Reopening-the-Arts-in-Northern-Ireland-July-2020.pdf>.

There is one particular area of distinction within the current guidance that allows professional musicians to engage in singing and playing wind and brass with others, albeit with extended distancing and other protections when they do so, but it states that '[n]on-professionals should not engage in singing with other people nor play wind and brass instruments with other people given that this activity poses a potentially higher risk of transmission.'

This restriction is intended to be transitional and was put in place on the basis of an assessment that singing and wind/brass playing could present a greater risk of virus transmission than other musical activities. Further scientific investigation has been undertaken on this issue and my Department is currently taking advice on its findings. Subject to that advice, consideration will be given to whether any change to the current guidance is appropriate.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether amateur artists and associated groups will be eligible for the £29 million funding for the arts sector.
(AQW 7590/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department is currently working on proposals for a suite of funding schemes to support these sectors. Details of the funding schemes including guidance, eligibility and application information will be announced in due course.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what steps her Department is taking to mitigate the requirement of face-to-face interviews in Child Maintenance Service investigations during the COVID-19 pandemic.
(AQW 7618/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Investigations are used to gather information and evidence to determine the most appropriate action available when seeking to collect child maintenance arrears. When conducting investigations, the Child Maintenance Service seeks to use the most relevant and least invasive means of securing the necessary information. In the majority of investigations this can be done by telephone or in writing without the requirement for face-to-face interviews.

The Child Maintenance Service has also temporarily introduced a more flexible approach to debt negotiation where there is evidence that a Paying Parent's ability to pay their child maintenance has been impacted by COVID-19. Where appropriate, the Child Maintenance Service engages with the Paying Parent by telephone to secure reasonable regular payments of at least 50% of ongoing maintenance. Paying Parents are advised that this is a temporary measure and that the arrears balance will still be collected.

Where a face-to-face interview is still required, for example, where a referral to the Public Prosecution Service is being considered, these are currently on hold. My Department is exploring what alternative options may be available to enable these interviews to take place safely during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail her departmental budgetary pressures.
(AQW 7632/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is seeking to manage within its existing baseline budget in 2020/21 but has submitted bids for Covid-19 pressures.

The Department submitted a prioritised list of Covid-19 Bids totalling £105m as part of the recent Covid-19 Economic Recovery Exercise:

Ranking	Prioritisation of Covid-19 Bids – August 2020	Bids £'000	Allocations £'000
a)	Local Councils (Quarters 2-4)	65,200	40,000
b)	Culture Recovery	33,000	29,000
c)	Labour Market Interventions	4,800	
d)	Sports Recovery	2,000	
	Total	105,000	69,000

The only bids not to be met were the £4.8m bid for Labour Market Interventions and the £2m bid for Sports Recovery, along with the balance of the Council bid. The Department will seek to manage these pressures within existing allocations and bid to DoF if required in the January Monitoring Round.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities whether she will support widening the eligibility criteria for the Discretionary Support Fund administered by her Department to include support for victims of domestic abuse.
(AQW 7658/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Discretionary Support administered by the Department for Communities currently includes provision for an unlimited number of awards to the victims of domestic abuse under its provision for disaster subject to the person meeting the relevant eligibility criteria.

A grant may be payable to cover removal expenses and storage charges; furniture, household equipment and connection charges for white goods; and clothing and footwear. The grant payment will take into account any assistance provided by other agencies and items such as those included in partly furnished accommodation.

To apply, a person should ring Freephone:0800 587 2750 or Text phone: 0800 587 2751 or they can complete the online form available on NI Direct using the following link: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/claim-discretionary-support>. Additional help and support to complete an application will be provided on request.

Further information on Discretionary Support is also available in the 'Extra Financial Support' section of NI Direct www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/extra-financial-support

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Communities to outline the support she has provided to local councils to help mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

(AQO 757/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 19 May 2020 Minister Hargey announced that the Executive was allocating £20.3m to local councils for the period mid-March – 30 June 2020, to assist them with their financial pressures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My Department liaised with the Association of Local Government Finance Officers (ALGFO) and SOLACE NI to assess the cash flow issues faced by councils for the period 1 July – 31 March 2021. As a result of this liaison my Department worked with the Department of Finance in order to seek urgent funding for the period 1 July – 31 March 2021, especially as they have and continue to lead on the community response to COVID-19.

On 24 September 2020, the Executive allocated £40m to councils to help address their financial pressures as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Councils here have faced significant financial challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and so this financial support will help to alleviate these losses thus ensuring Councils can positively contribute to local economic, social and environmental recovery, and help to play a very vital role in that recovery.

Councils will be key in the delivery of public services throughout the period of recovery, in terms of economic and community development. It is critical that councils are supported financially in order to deliver these much needed public services in the months ahead and to enable them to support economic recovery.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities how much each Council will receive of the £40 million funding for Councils announced by the Executive; and how the monies will be spent.

(AQW 7687/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is carrying out an analysis of the figures provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for the period July 2020 to September 2020 and actual spend for the period March 2020 to June 2020.

Once the Department has carried out a due diligence exercise on the information provided by councils, the figures are to be signed off by individual Council Chief Executives. Final consultation with ALGFO (Association of Local Government Finance Officers) and SOLACE NI (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) will also take place.

This will provide a basis for allocation that will be consistent with the original bid for support as approved by the Executive. Allocations of funding will be confirmed once due diligence has been completed.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of pavement licences issued by District Council area since January 2020.

(AQW 7689/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department does not gather information in respect of the number of pavement licences issued by district council area.

Under the Licensing of Pavement Cafés Act (NI) 2014, it is the responsibility of each district council to design a pavement café scheme and impose conditions on individual licenses. The Act contains a significant degree of flexibility for councils to respond to local circumstances.

Councils are not required to detail the number of pavement licenses issued to my Department; nor does my Department gather this information.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities how long she has had the draft report on the Housing Allocation scheme for review; and when the report will be published.

(AQW 7694/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A consultation on 'A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations' ran from September to December 2017. The Consultation ended some time ago and the important issues raised by consultees need careful consideration and action.

I received the report shortly after taking up the post as Minister for Communities in June. I am actively considering proposals raised by this Review and as you will be aware, I have already made my views known on the matter of intimidation points. The Review contains 19 other proposals which also require consideration. As you will understand, progress has been affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during which I have updated Executive colleagues and the Communities Committee.

I am keen to progress the Review by publishing a consultation report that not only details stakeholder views but that importantly provides a clear way forward and includes an implementation plan. I anticipate publication of the report later in the autumn.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities why discretionary support applications take 3 to 5 days to process.
(AQW 7732/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: This has been an extremely challenging time to deliver Discretionary Support with processing times impacted by increased demand, increased staff absences and reduced office capacity due to the implications of social distancing on the workplace.

A range of measures have been quickly introduced to improve the amount of time to process an application, including increasing the supply of IT equipment and software to facilitate remote working.

Despite the challenges, applications are currently being processed within an average of 3 working days.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities why discretionary support are not accepting telephone calls.
(AQW 7733/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Discretionary Support Freephone service operates between 10am and 4pm, Monday to Friday. All calls are closely monitored with no technical faults or failure to deliver calls recently reported.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her consideration of the consultation A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations; and whether she intends to make any changes to the Housing Selection Scheme in this mandate.

(AQW 7757/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A consultation on 'A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations' ran from September to December 2017.

I am actively considering proposals raised by this Review and as you will be aware, I have already made my views known on the matter of intimidation points. The Review contains 19 other proposals which also require consideration. Progress has been affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during which I have updated Executive colleagues and the Communities Committee.

I am keen to progress the Review by publishing a consultation report that not only details stakeholder views but that importantly provides a clear way forward and includes an implementation plan. I anticipate publication of the report later in the autumn.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities whether she has any plans to engage with representatives of Irish League football clubs to address the issue of potential reduction in gate receipts as a result of COVID-19 regulations.

(AQW 7774/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Officials in my Department continue to engage with the Irish Football Association and the NI Football League, on a range of Covid-19 issues including the number of spectators at sporting events and the financial impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the sport.

Any progress on a return of larger numbers of spectators to sports grounds will have to be aligned with the Executives plans to address the surge in Covid cases, the evolving Covid restrictions and the guidelines at a given point in time. I recognise that this has the potential to financially impact on the ability of sports across the sector to generate income.

In addition to the support already being provided by my Department and Sport NI, I have asked officials to continue their engagement with the sports sector as they explore what further help can be given to the sector as we progress through this pandemic.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Communities when Sub Regional Stadia funding, announced in 2016, will be allocated to football clubs.

(AQW 7810/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the "New Decade, New Approach" Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme. This will be followed by the further development of the Programme including consideration of the processes necessary for future allocation of funding.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many homes in each constituency have been purchased with the assistance of co-ownership.

(AQW 7814/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The following information has been provided by Co-ownership Housing Association:

Co-Ownership completions by parliamentary constituency (2017/18 - 2019/20)

		2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	
Parliamentary constituency	Belfast East	59	49	61	169
	Belfast North	43	71	78	192
	Belfast South	27	19	29	75
	Belfast West	67	49	70	186
	East Antrim	32	31	40	103
	East Derry/Londonderry	20	23	38	81
	Fermanagh and South Tyrone	24	42	40	106
	Foyle	11	28	21	60
	Lagan Valley	75	85	96	256
	Mid Ulster	25	60	76	161
	Newry and Armagh	29	45	39	113
	North Antrim	37	53	61	151
	North Down	72	91	90	253
	South Antrim	73	91	107	271
	South Down	29	53	31	113
	Strangford	55	68	75	198
	Upper Bann	119	144	153	416
West Tyrone	6	13	13	32	
Total		803	1015	1118	2,936

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 7023/17-22, to detail the average monthly deduction from an affected households' payments.

(AQW 7815/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As responded to in AQW 7023/17-22 as at 31 May 2020, a total of 2,620 Universal Credit households were impacted by the two child policy. As the two child policy meant that a person claiming Universal Credit received payment for two children only, there were no deductions made from a person or household's Universal Credit entitlement.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities how many oral hearings were heard on an average weekly basis by the Appeals Service in the 12 month period, prior to the COVID-19 lockdown commencing in March 2020.

(AQW 7844/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: During the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, 6,668 oral sessions were arranged over 48 weeks of the year. As a result an average of 139 oral sessions were held during each of these weeks.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities how many virtual appeal hearings were held on an average weekly basis by the Appeals Service in (i) August; and (ii) September 2020.

(AQW 7845/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: During August 2020, 45 sessions (90 appeals) were held, all of which were cases determined on the papers before the tribunal panel.

During September 2020, 53 sessions (103 appeal hearings) were held. The majority of these were determined on the papers before the tribunal panel as telephone hearings only commenced on 28 September 2020.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities how many appellants are currently awaiting an appeal hearing with the Appeals Service; and how do those numbers compare with the 6 month period prior to lockdown commencing in March 2020.

(AQW 7846/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: At the 31 August 2020 there were 4,974 cases ready to list compared to 5,396 cases ready to list at 31 August 2019.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities how many licences to hold virtual or electronic hearings have been purchased by the Appeals Service, or by her Department on the Appeals Service behalf; and for her assessment of the adequacy of these numbers to meet demand.

(AQW 7847/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has purchased 10 licences that together allow 13 remote hearings to take place simultaneously. This is sufficient to meet the current demand, but if demand for remote hearings increases, additional licences can be purchased.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities how much of the £29 million funding for arts will be distributed to people and organisations not already clients of the Arts Council for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7858/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The £29m package is not directed solely at the arts but will provide a much needed lifeline and significant boost across our culture, language, arts and heritage sectors, which have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

Given the breadth and depth of the need it is my intention that the programmes being created should be open to as wide as possible a range of individuals and organisations across these sectors, including those not currently in receipt of Arts Council funding.

The details of the new funding schemes will be announced in due course but until funding decisions have actually been taken it is impossible to say how much of the £29 million funding will be distributed to people and organisations not already clients of the Arts Council.

However, you may be interested to note that in the first round of funding released under the now £5.5m Creative Support Fund, which was first established by Minister Hargey and to which I allocated a further £4m, a third of the individual recipients and 21 of the 150 organisations that have so far received funding were not previous Arts Council funding recipients.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to introduce a COVID-19 sick payment scheme for hospitality workers.

(AQW 7875/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Statutory Sick Pay is paid by employers to employees, including hospitality workers, who are incapable of work due to sickness. It is paid at a flat rate of £95.85 for up to 28 weeks. To be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay, an individual must: be classed as an employee and have done some work for their employer; have been ill for at least 4 days in a row (including non-working days); earn an average of at least £120 per week; and tell their employer that they are sick before the employer's deadline, or within 7 days if the employer has not set a deadline.

A number of amendments have been made to Statutory Sick Pay in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes extend Statutory Sick Pay to those who need to self-isolate for medical reasons to protect others. The three day waiting period for Statutory Sick Pay has also been temporarily removed meaning that Statutory Sick Pay, where an eligible individual is sick or self-isolating due to COVID-19 will be available from day one.

Amendments were also made to provide that a person who has been advised by the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well Being that they have had contact with a person who is symptomatic or has tested positive for COVID-19, and that they should stay at home and self-isolate as a result, is deemed to be incapable of work and therefore entitled to Statutory Sick Pay.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities for a timescale for the delivery of funding for the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer.

(AQW 7896/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the "New Decade, New Approach" Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme including the timetable for delivery.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities whether there has been any discussions with the Irish Football League and the Irish Football Association on the provision of funding for football clubs impacted by COVID-19.

(AQW 7898/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Officials in my Department continue to engage with the NI Football League and the Irish Football Association on a range of Covid-19 issues including the financial impact of Covid-19 restrictions on football clubs.

In addition to the support already being provided by my Department and Sport NI, I have asked officials to continue their engagement with the sports sector as they explore what further help, including financial help, can be given to the sector as we progress through this pandemic. These discussions are ongoing.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what assessment she has made of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic and the UK's exit from the EU will have on employment rates; and what measures she will introduce to support people who lose their jobs in coming months.

(AQW 7909/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The COVID-19 Pandemic alone has led to unprecedented challenges in the labour market and I expect exit from the EU is likely to exacerbate those challenges. Officials are currently expecting the claimant count to rise 110,000 people and a rate of 12% unemployed from the impact of COVID-19 and I am aware that other estimates give a worst case scenario of 125,000 claimants and an unemployment rate of 14%. I expect young people to be suffer a disproportionate impact as a result of COVID-19

My officials are developing range of measures to support people who lose their jobs.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities when applications can be made for support under the £29 million package allocated for cultural recovery.

(AQW 7910/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The £29m allocation from the Executive is in addition to the £5.5m Creative Support Fund previously established by the Department of which, to date, £1.9 million has been paid to small to medium organisations in addition to just over £0.5 million to individuals.

My officials are engaging with partners across central and local government, as well as arm's length bodies and sectoral representatives to ensure the funding is distributed quickly, fairly and to maximise its impact. Work on the programme of support across the wider the arts, culture, heritage and indigenous languages sectors is well advanced and details of the new funding schemes, including guidance, eligibility and application information will be available in due course.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities what consideration she has given to devolving regeneration powers and associated resources to local councils; and whether any stakeholder engagement has occurred on this matter.

(AQW 7944/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A number of attempts have been made to date to transfer regeneration powers and associated resources to local councils as part of the wider Reform of Public Administration (RPA) – 2011, 2015 and 2016. On each occasion this did not progress due to a lack of consensus on the issue.

Since 2016, DfC Development Offices have been working ever more closely with councils and this collaboration is working well at present, but we will seek to strengthen this further.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of written assembly questions her Department has answered since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7990/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Between the 11 January 2020 and 1 October 2020 my Department answered 929 Assembly Written Questions.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether criteria for the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme was set by her Department or each council.

(AQW 8010/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Programme has been designed to provide maximum flexibility, enabling councils to work with local stakeholders to tailor their schemes to best meet the needs of their areas.

My Department established objectives and targets for the overall programme, but is a matter for the each council to set criteria for their individual grant schemes.

Each council has established a stakeholder forum to advise them on the interventions required and this consultation has been fed into the Revitalisation Plans that each council has prepared which identify how their allocations will be used.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities when Belfast City Council received the letter of offer for the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme.

(AQW 8011/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The letter of offer for Tranche 1 of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme was issued to Belfast City Council on 28th July 2020.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities when councils are to receive letters of offer for the second tranche of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme.

(AQW 8014/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials are currently working with councils to finalise their proposals for Tranche 2 of the programme. Letters of Offer will be issued as soon as Councils' final Revitalisation Plans have been agreed. It is anticipated letters of offer will be issued in October.

Department of Education

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he will ensure that online and virtual learning is made available for children who have to isolate due to COVID-19.

(AQW 6913/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): If a child has to self-isolate for a designated period due to COVID-19, parents should talk directly to their school about provision of education material.

In addition, my Department has asked schools to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning in the event of a school closure, or that a class or large group of pupils need to self-isolate.

A small number of children will be advised by their clinical team not to attend school. The vast majority of these children would routinely be advised not to attend school even outside pandemic period due to the risk of infections other than COVID-19. Where a child has been medically advised by a consultant not to attend school during 2020/21, parents should consult with their school Principal and, as required, the Education Authority regarding education provision for these pupils.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail, per school, the number of iPads provided by the Department of Education since January 2020.

(AQW 7189/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has already provided a significant number of digital devices to pupils. Since June 2020, 7,455 devices have been earmarked for use in schools. Of these, 6,708 devices (of which 3,222 are Chromebooks) have already been delivered to schools, with the remaining devices being prepared for delivery.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education when the process of right sizing will be completed for Bunscoil Cholmcille, Derry.

(AQW 7231/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are no actions in the current Annual Action Plan in relation to Bunscoil Cholmcille.

If the Managing Authority require any changes to the current approved admissions or enrolment numbers they should consider bringing forward a Development Proposal.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education what date a condition survey will be carried out for Bunscoil Cholmcille, Derry.

(AQW 7232/17-22)

Mr Weir: Officials from my Department and the Education Authority met with the Principal and Chair of the Board of Governors of Bunscoil Cholmcille on 24 September 2020 to review the accommodation at the school. It is anticipated that the general condition survey and the structural survey of the modular accommodation will be completed by end-October 2020.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of security and maintenance for all properties owned or managed by his Department's arm's-length bodies, broken down by property, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7283/17-22)

Mr Weir: The information you have requested is detailed in its nature and will take a period of time to collate, as it requires information to be extracted from the Education Authority's finance system.

Unfortunately I am unable to provide a definitive answer at this time, however when my officials have received the necessary information I will issue a detailed response.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will ensure CCEA examiners will be paid for work that was due to be undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 7444/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department understands the importance of, and is extremely grateful for, the vital role that contractors play in the exams process. Some of the examiners in question had already delivered work in relation to the cancelled exams and all these individuals have been paid for this work under their current contracts. These payments amounted to almost £1million in the period April 2020 – August 2020.

My officials have worked closely with CCEA to examine a range of options aimed at resolving the issue of payment in lieu of 'lost work'. However, the Department has a duty to ensure that public money is used in the most appropriate manner, and having carefully considered the accompanying legal advice and given the pressures currently faced by schools and the wider education sector, I cannot justify making a non-contractual compensatory payment in these circumstances.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education (i) to detail the process of how a young person can access (a) a chromebook; and (b) a wi-fi voucher; and (ii) how many devices have been delivered to schools.

(AQW 7479/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schools can make requests for pupils who meet the criteria and who do not have sufficient access to a digital device to support their learning. Priority is being given to pupils in Years 4, 7, 12 and 14, in this current academic year, and should resources be available following this, the initiative may be widened out to include other year groups.

Since June 2020, 7,455 devices have been allocated to schools. Of these, 6,708 devices (of which 3,222 are Chromebooks) have already been delivered to schools, with the remaining allocated devices in the process of delivery.

Up to 1 October 2020, 1,502 Wi-Fi vouchers have been delivered to schools and further allocations of Wi-Fi to schools for their pupils is ongoing.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the work his Department is undertaking to secure additional, non-COVID-19 orientated, resources for schools during the remainder of the 2020/21 school year, and for the 2021/22 school year.

(AQW 7524/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department increased the 2020-21 Aggregated Schools Budget by £53.3m when compared to the 2019-20 budget position. This resulted in an increase in the Age Weighted Pupil Unit cash value for pupils in nursery & primary schools and post-primary schools respectively from £2,114.60 and £2,172.21 in 2019-20 to £2,208.31 and £2,265.92 in 2020-21.

Considering this uplift, and in recognition of the COVID-19 pandemic, resourcing pressures in grant-aided schools are being kept under review and will continue to be assessed alongside the other budget pressures across education. My Department will continue to bid for additional resources in the remaining monitoring rounds throughout the rest of the financial year.

Looking forward to 2021-22, acknowledging the commitment given in the New Decade New Approach agreement to address resourcing pressures in schools, my Department continues to highlight and bid for additional resources to address the forecast pressures facing grant-aided schools next year.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education why the 14-19 year old strategy has not been included in his Department's 2020-21 Business Plan.

(AQW 7562/17-22)

Mr Weir: As with the Department's 2019-20 Business Plan, the Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project is encompassed within the Department's 2020-21 Business Plan under the Transformation Programme (6.1).

The Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project was temporarily suspended in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to redeploy staff to business critical tasks.

The Minister for the Economy and I have asked officials to consider how best and when to stand this work up again. However, I am committed to the development of a joint 14-19 Strategy as soon as possible within the available resources.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Education what stage the transfer of school lands in Derrylaughan/Derrytresk to Loughneagh Partnership is currently at.

(AQW 7599/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department has recently completed the First Registration of the lands it owns in Derrylaughan/Derrytresk. This was a necessary step in the process of completing the long term lease between the Department and the Lough Neagh Landscape Partnership.

The Departments solicitors have been instructed to complete negotiations with the Lough Neagh Landscape Partnership and their legal representatives. Once the draft lease has been drawn up and both parties agree to its contents, it will be signed off by all parties concerned.

Unfortunately I am unable to provide a timescale for this as it will require negotiations between solicitors acting on behalf of both parties, however my Department is supportive of the proposed lease and progress will not be unnecessarily delayed by my Department.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education whether he will provide clarity in relation to post-primary transfer, specifically relating to schools who have suspended using the transfer test for the 2020/21 academic year; and advise what processes and arrangements will need to be progressed by the schools concerned to enable this to happen.

(AQW 7603/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department has carried out an exercise to gather evidence to assess the significance of the proposed change to remove academic selection on a temporary basis and the effects this is likely to have within the schools concerned, upon neighbouring post-primary schools and feeder primary schools, and to identify if those effects are deemed significant or not. The purpose of this was to establish whether such a proposed change, on a temporary basis, would require a Development Proposal (DP).

Due to the temporary nature of the decisions and taking account of the current difficult circumstances that schools are operating in, created by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the potential impact on the children who will be applying to attend the schools, evidence gathered and assessed did not demonstrate the need for a DP. The Department is writing to the schools concerned to advise them of this decision.

The schools concerned will now need to publish alternative admissions criteria that will enable them to select children for admission if they are oversubscribed.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered keeping the Summer Food Payment Scheme running through to next year.

(AQW 7681/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Executive decided that a Summer Food Payment Scheme should be provided as a direct result of the impact Covid-19 was having on families of school children. This included restrictions on normal summer scheme provision, which can include food provision. The scheme provided ex-gratia payments over the months of July and August to alleviate hardship for families, whose children would normally be entitled to free school meals (FSM) at school. In addition to this, the Eat Well Live Well programme was extended to provide additional support to up to 5,000 of the most vulnerable young people. These initiatives cost almost £12.5m and funding was agreed by the Executive.

The issue of children going hungry during school holiday periods has long been recognised and while it may be exacerbated this year by Covid-19, it is something that causes concern during every holiday period. However, food poverty/holiday hunger is not for one department to resolve alone, it will require a cross departmental effort to address this issue including consideration of the continuation of the scheme.

While there is a duty on the education sector to provide a meal, suitable as the main meal of the day, to pupils entitled to FSM during term-time this duty does not extend to holiday periods. The Department of Education's contribution to any initiatives dealing with food poverty will be linked to tackling educational disadvantage and holiday learning loss. This year around £12m in funding from the Executive was secured to support schools to run Summer Schools; to help schools purchase online Virtual Learning resources for children going into Year 7; and, to offer the "Engage" programme, which focusses particularly on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

All schools in the Extended Schools programme will continue to receive allocations at the same rate as last year. This will continue support at this critical time when pupils and their families need it most. The Extended Schools programme has been a key vehicle through which the Department has sought to support our most disadvantaged learners for the past 14 years, enabling schools to provide targeted services before, during and after the school day.

An Expert Panel to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background has been established. The panel has been tasked to produce an Action Plan for change by May 2021 that will ensure all children and young people, regardless of background, are given the best start in life.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered the impact on food poverty if the Summer Food Payment Scheme is not extended next year.

(AQW 7682/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Executive decided that a Summer Food Payment Scheme should be provided as a direct result of the impact Covid-19 was having on families of school children. This included restrictions on normal summer scheme provision, which can include food provision. The scheme provided ex-gratia payments over the months of July and August to alleviate hardship for families, whose children would normally be entitled to free school meals (FSM) at school. In addition to this, the Eat Well Live Well programme was extended to provide additional support to up to 5,000 of the most vulnerable young people. These initiatives cost almost £12.5m and funding was agreed by the Executive.

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Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) any funding his Department has paid to Cara-Friend in each of the last 3 years; and (ii) the purpose for which the money was awarded.
(AQW 7728/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education has not provided funding to Cara-Friend in any of the last 3 years.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many cases of bullying have been recorded by each school in North Down, over the last five years.
(AQW 7773/17-22)

Mr Weir: The information requested is not held by the Department.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education whether his Department recognises that flexibility on the choice of public transport route, of bus or rail, could assist pupils in accessing a wider range of extra-curricular activity by widening the choice of the available routes to travel home.
(AQW 7788/17-22)

Mr Weir: The purpose of home to school transport is to facilitate the attendance of pupils at school based on a school's usual opening hours which would not include extra-curricular activities. The current contractual arrangements between the EA and Translink facilitates the issue of either a bus or train ticket for each pupil. It is for the EA to determine the most suitable method of assisting pupils and in doing so they are required to have due regard to efficiency and economy.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education why school transport passes are issued to school pupils specifically for bus or train rather than a choice of public transport means, where such option of alternative bus or rail routes exists.
(AQW 7789/17-22)

Mr Weir: The purpose of home to school transport is to facilitate the attendance of pupils at school based on a school's usual opening hours which would not include extra-curricular activities. The current contractual arrangements between the EA and Translink facilitates the issue of either a bus or train ticket for each pupil. It is for the EA to determine the most suitable method of assisting pupils and in doing so they are required to have due regard to efficiency and economy.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of school pupils identified as dyslexic; and (ii) the support mechanisms available to these pupils.
(AQW 7807/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) A total of 9,877 (source: annual School Census 2019/20) pupils have a Special Educational Need of Dyslexia in nursery schools, pre-schools, primary, post primary, special and education other than at school (EOTAS) settings.
- (ii) The overarching responsibility for meeting the literacy needs of pupils rests with the school in which they are enrolled. The Education Authority (EA) Literacy Service provides a broad range of support through a continuum of provision via a programme of offer encompassing tiered provision:

Universal support is designed to build the capacity of schools to meet the needs of pupils and parents with increasing confidence and skill, through training and capacity building which is available to all schools. Training can build the knowledge, resilience and skills of staff and, where appropriate, parents in specific areas of need. This programme was available to all schools as centre-based training and is currently being developed into an online format due to COVID-19.

The EA Literacy Service website (<https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-supportservices/literacy-service>) contains a range of guidance on resources, activities and ideas designed for parents to support a pupil experiencing a literacy difficulty.

Targeted support is designed for school staff, parents and pupils with an assessed level of need following an EA Educational Psychology assessment. It consists of the provision of targeted advice and guidance based on the assessed needs of the pupil. An important element of this includes the effective use of assistive technology to support the pupil.

EA Literacy Service - Intensive support builds on the foundations laid in schools through both capacity building and targeted support programmes where provided. Without these foundations, the outcomes of any intensive support will be compromised. A programme of Intensive support will focus on the identified and assessed needs of an individual pupil.

The use of ICT and assistive technology can be a significant enabler. All schools have access to assistive technology software to assist in supporting literacy difficulties through C2K. This includes text-to-speech and speech-to-text software and software to support reading, writing and spelling. The Literacy Service Continuing Professional Development Programme includes training for schools in the use of important elements of this software.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has any plans to fund a new minor capital works scheme for schools.

(AQW 7816/17-22)

Mr Weir: The November 2017 Joint Department of Education and Education Authority Minor Works Call List remains live and I have no plans to make a further Call at this time.

Depending on progress completing works off the existing list, I would however anticipate giving consideration to making a further call at some point in 2021.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 7368/17-22, as information on the overall budget position is not being sought but rather the expenditure to date, why this cannot be supplied.

(AQW 7827/17-22)

Mr Weir: As noted in my answers to AQW 6594 17-22 and AQW 6596 17-22, public disclosure of the budget or spend to date would be commercially prejudicial to the EA as this information would provide the supplier with valuable insight and context for any future negotiations the EA might be required to undertake with them between now and full implementation of the HR & Payroll solution.

As further elaborated in my answer to AQW 7368 17-22; this applies to both the budget position and the total expenditure to date. This is particularly the case when it comes to negotiating ongoing and future contractual change control with the system supplier. While the supplier would have knowledge of project expenditure with the supplier as the contracted party, it would not be party to information on the scale of expenditure on other aspects of the project nor on total project spend.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he is aware of the Trousers for All campaign; (ii) for his assessment of the campaign; and (iii) what steps his Department is taking to ensure that school uniform guidance meets the needs of all students.

(AQW 7850/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am aware of the Trousers for All campaign. A number of students have recently written to me in relation to this campaign. I am always impressed when children and young people are empowered to address issues that are important to them and have their voices heard.

The wearing of a school uniform is not governed by legislation but falls to schools to determine. The day-to-day management of schools, including school uniform policy, is a matter for school Principals, subject to any directions that might be given by the Board of Governors. To assist schools in developing their school uniform policies the Department issued non statutory guidance. The guidance advises that schools should ensure that their school uniform policy is fair and reasonable, in practical and financial terms, and should have regard to their duties under relevant equality and other legislation.

It encourages schools to consult widely and consider how they can involve their pupils directly in the process of developing a uniform policy for example, through the school council providing input into designing the uniform or communicating the school's policy to parents/prospective parents and other pupils.

Whilst the guidance does not specifically mention the wearing of trousers by female pupils it does encourage schools to consider the seasonable suitability of wearing shorts or skirts in the winter and wearing heavy tights or warm blazers in the summer.

The guidance was reissued as a reminder to schools in 2018 and is available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201104-guidance-schools-school-uniform-policy-revised-5-june-2018> .

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 656/17-22, to detail any timeframe that exists for the project stages.

(AQW 7872/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is anticipated that the first stage of the procurement process to appoint an Integrated Consultant Team (Design Team) will commence imminently.

Unfortunately, until this process is complete and the Design Team in place, it is not possible to provide a detailed programme for the project.

As previously advised in my speech on 23 June 2020, I do not anticipate construction spend on recently announced projects until the 2024-25 financial year.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 7602/17-22, (i) to confirm that the development proposal for St John the Baptist College, Portadown, will recommence from the stage it was paused at and will not have to be restarted; and (ii) when he expects the development proposals to recommence.

(AQW 7884/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- i. The Education Authority (EA) has carried out its pre-publication consultation with schools likely to be affected by Development Proposal (DP 646) which proposes to establish Key Stage 4 provision at St John the Baptist College. The pre-publication consultation ended on 5 March.

The next step in the Development Proposal process would involve DP 646 going to the EA's Education Committee to be ratified for publication and it is anticipated that this will happen when area planning is fully resumed.

- ii. The Education Authority's Education Committee met for the first time this academic year on 10 September 2020 but apart from the Special Schools Framework for Area Planning, which was not impacted by Covid-19, no other area planning issues or Development Proposals were taken to the Committee. My Department is also finalising arrangements for the recommencement of meetings of the Area Planning Steering Group, with the first meeting scheduled for 21 October 2020.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to detail the schools in Upper Bann who applied for (i) the Minor Capital Works Programme; and (ii) the Major Capital Works Programme; broken down by successful and unsuccessful applications, within the last 5 years.

(AQW 7892/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) When the Joint Department of Education and Education Authority Call for Minor Works was finalised in November 2017 all existing schemes, (except a number of high priority Health and Safety related works) were nullified at that time and the schools were advised to reapply under the New Call if the work was still required.

Table 1 below details the schools in Upper Bann who applied for minor capital works in the November 2017 call, and identifies the applications which have progressed to date.

The two further columns detail the number of subsequent requests/applications received under the 'unavoidable' minor works process. The majority of these were successfully progressed however the final column identifies the number that were not successful.

- (ii) This information is detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 1 – Minor Capital Work Applications from October 2017

Schools in Upper Bann		No. of Minor Works applied for in Oct 2017 Joint Call	No. of Oct 2017 Joint Call Applications Progressed to Date	No. of Unavoidable Minor Works applied for since Oct 2017	No. of Unavoidable Minor Works Applications since Oct 2017 that were Unsuccessful
Nursery Schools					
5110021	Edenderry Nursery School	2	0	0	0
5116189	Millington Nursery School	1	0	0	0
5116190	Harrison Nursery School	2	0	0	0
5116238	Banbridge Nursery School	0	0	0	0
5116256	Downshire Nursery School	0	0	0	0
5136217	St John the Baptist Nursery	0	0	0	0
5136631	Drumnamoe Nursery School	0	0	1	1
Primary Schools					
5010992	Lurgan Model Primary School	14	2	0	0
5011124	King's Park Primary School Lurgan	9	0	0	0
5011127	Carrick Primary School	19	3	0	0
5011129	Hart Memorial Primary School	6	1	0	0
5011165	Rich Mount Primary School	4	0	0	0

Schools in Upper Bann		No. of Minor Works applied for in Oct 2017 Joint Call	No. of Oct 2017 Joint Call Applications Progressed to Date	No. of Unavoidable Minor Works applied for since Oct 2017	No. of Unavoidable Minor Works Applications since Oct 2017 that were Unsuccessful
5011174	Birches Primary School	12	1	0	0
5011189	Edenderry Primary School	7	1	1	0
5011190	Tullygally Primary School	8	1	0	0
5011594	Abercorn Primary School	16	1	0	0
5011596	Gilford Primary School	7	0	0	0
5011598	Waringstown Primary School	4	0	1	0
5011602	Bleary Primary School	18	1	1	0
5011651	Milltown Primary School	1	1	0	0
5011664	Scarva Primary School	2	0	0	0
5011687	Maralin Village Primary School	0	0	0	0
5013019	Edenderry Primary School	8	0	1	0
5016007	Millington Primary School	7	0	0	0
5016065	Dickson Primary School	7	1	0	0
5016080	Drumgor Primary School	4	0	1	0
5016117	Ballyoran Primary School	7	1	0	0
5016138	Bocobra Primary School	13	2	0	0
5016178	Donacloney Primary School	4	0	0	0
5016543	Moyallon Primary School	0	0	0	0
5031103	Tannaghmore Primary School	0	0	0	0
5031160	St Teresa's Primary School	0	0	0	0
5031164	St Mary's Primary School	4	2	0	0
5031168	St Patrick's Primary School	5	1	0	0
5031184	St Anthony's Primary School	2	1	4	1
5031667	St Patrick's Primary School	2	0	2	1
5031669	St John's Primary School	1	0	0	0
5033324	St Patrick's Primary School	5	0	0	0
5036006	St Mary's Primary School	9	0	4	4
5036009	St Mary's Primary School	2	1	1	0
5036043	St Mary's Primary School	0	0	0	0
5036101	St Brendan's Primary School	32	5	4	2
5036173	St John the Baptist Primary School	6	2	1	0
5036400	St Colman's (Bann) Primary School	1	0	2	2

Schools in Upper Bann		No. of Minor Works applied for in Oct 2017 Joint Call	No. of Oct 2017 Joint Call Applications Progressed to Date	No. of Unavoidable Minor Works applied for since Oct 2017	No. of Unavoidable Minor Works Applications since Oct 2017 that were Unsuccessful
5036457	St Francis' Primary School Aghderg	1	0	1	1
5036586	Presentation Primary School	1	0	0	0
5036633	St Francis Primary School	2	1	5	2
5046137	Seagoe Primary School	2	0	2	1
5066540	Bridge Integrated Primary School	3	1	1	0
5066553	Portadown Integrated Primary School	0	0	5	2
Post Primary Schools					
5210043	Clounagh Junior High School	15	0	0	0
5210047	Banbridge High School	10	0	1	0
5210054	Killicomaine Junior High School	13	2	2	0
5210271	Lurgan Junior High	15	0	0	0
5210282	Craigavon Senior High School	14	0	1	0
5230076	St Patrick's College	24	1	5	2
5230213	Lismore Comprehensive School	22	5	4	1
5230321	St John the Baptist College	0	0	0	0
5250216	Brownlow Int College	7	0	0	0
5260285	New-Bridge Integrated College	4	2	1	0
5410013	Banbridge Academy	10	0	0	0
5410057	Lurgan College	32	2	0	0
5410067	Portadown College	14	0	0	0
5420314	St Ronan's College	0	0	1	0
5316520	Donard Special School	1	0	1	0
5316521	Ceara Special School	0	0	1	0
Total MWA's		441	42	55	20

Table 2 - Major Capital Call Applications from 2015

	Successful Applications	Unsuccessful Applications
2016	King's Park PS, Lurgan	Abercorn PS, Banbridge
	St Malachy's PS, Armagh	Presentation PS, Craigavon
	St Peter's PS, Dungannon	Saints & Scholar's PS, Armagh

	Successful Applications	Unsuccessful Applications
2020	St Mary's PS, Craigavon	Carrick PS, Lurgan
	Tandragee JHS, Armagh	The Royal School, Armagh
		St Catherine's College, Armagh
		Clounagh JHS, Portadown
		Lurgan JHS, Lurgan

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 7282/17-22, to detail (i) the number of students who are awaiting a refund; and (ii) the amount of refund due.

(AQW 7900/17-22)

Mr Weir: As already indicated in my answer to AQW 7282/ 17-22, CCEA is currently considering the issue of examination fee charges and will prepare an options paper for submission to my Department for consideration.

Specific details pertaining to refunds and fees, including the number of pupils impacted, can be finalised following my consideration of this paper's recommendations.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 7208/17-22, to provide a timeframe for this review.

(AQW 7901/17-22)

Mr Weir: Details about the review, including the timeframe, will be made available once the arrangements have been finalised.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Education what progress is being made on plans to for a new school build at Seaview Primary School.

(AQW 7914/17-22)

Mr Weir: The major capital works project for Seaview Primary School is currently at business case stage.

A technical feasibility report which considered potential sites has been completed.

Completion of the business case was delayed due to Covid-19.

The Education Authority is working towards finalising the business case and hope to have it submitted to the Department in December 2020.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education (i) when the Common Funding Scheme review will be back in operation; and (ii) when it will report .

(AQW 7920/17-22)

Mr Weir: In March 2020, at the outset of lockdown, the Education Transformation Programme, including the Review of the Common Funding Scheme (RCFS) Project, was stood down.

I am currently considering timings of restarting the RCFS Project and when it might report.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education what is the purpose and rationale for including a pupil's religion in the form of Catholic, Protestant and Other in the recently published statistical bulletin relating to qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers from grant-aided schools in the 2018/19 academic year.

(AQW 7935/17-22)

Mr Weir: Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations across a range of categories outlined in the Act (including religious belief). In order to assess and monitor the impacts of policies the Department gathers relevant information and data.

Data gathered on pupil religion in the 'Qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers' statistical publications is grouped into Protestant, Catholic or Other, reflecting the fact that Protestant and Catholic are the two main religious categories in Northern Ireland. The 'Other' category is used to capture a wide range of other religions and those of no religion, where the numbers/proportions are much smaller and if broken down further could prevent publication of data.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education when the temporary heating system in St Anthony's Primary School, Craigavon, will be replaced with a permanent one.

(AQW 7980/17-22)

Mr Weir: Subject to Business Case approval, the refurbishment of the boiler house at St Anthony's Primary School is planned for commencement late October 2020.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to review the requirements around home to school transport.

(AQW 8024/17-22)

Mr Weir: As part of the Education Transformation Programme, a review of the home to school transport policy was being taken forward focussing on ensuring that the policy is fit for purpose and sustainable over the long term. However due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I temporarily suspended the Transformation Programme in order that resources could be reprioritised. No decision has yet been taken in respect of the Programme's suspension being lifted.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Education what action his Department is taking to address the disparity which exists around home to school transport, namely the fact that there is no statutory responsibility for the Education Authority to provide assistance to Key Stage 1 children with transport when they live more than 2 miles from school, yet over 5,000 of these children are able to avail of transport at 2:00pm.

(AQW 8025/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has a statutory duty to provide transport assistance to all pupils who meet the eligibility criteria as detailed in DE Circular 1996/41. At primary level, the Education Authority has a duty to provide transport assistance to pupils if they live more than two miles away from their school, based on the shortest walkable route, and have been unsuccessful in applying for a place in all schools of the same category within two miles of their home. The Education Authority's provision of transport assistance for pupils who meet these criteria will usually be based around the usual opening hours of a school, however in some cases, the Education Authority may transport some pupils earlier in the afternoon for vehicle capacity reasons.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education what powers he has to overturn decisions on new school builds as part of Fresh Start funding.

(AQW 8028/17-22)

Mr Weir: Article 4 of The Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 specifies that the functions of a department shall at all times be exercised subject to the direction and control of the Minister.

In the specific instance of Fresh Start funded projects, approval of funding from Her Majesty's Treasury to proceed to construction is dependent on the submission of a signed commitment from the Department's Accounting Officer that value for money has been fully tested.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education whether there is a time limit on funds available under Fresh Start for major capital works including new school builds.

(AQW 8029/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Fresh Start Agreement (FSA) in 2016 set out a commitment by the UK Government to release up to £500m over ten years of new capital funding to support shared and integrated education, subject to individual projects being agreed between the Executive and the UK Government. Access to Fresh Start Funding is scheduled to end on 31 March 2026.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail the risk assessments carried out to establish the recommendation to wear masks in schools.

(AQW 8058/17-22)

Mr Weir: Public Health advice states that 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.

This is why social distancing, regular hand hygiene, and covering coughs and sneezes is important in controlling the spread of the virus.

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.

Because face coverings are mainly intended to protect others, not the wearer, from coronavirus (COVID-19) they're not a replacement for social distancing and regular hand washing.

The Department's revised Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for School and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland was published on 29 September 2020. It has been informed by advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor.

The guidance provides an overarching framework for how schools and education settings in Northern Ireland can operate in an ongoing COVID environment, with the aim of ensuring broad consistency and equity across local areas, but is sufficiently flexible to allow education settings and staff to adapt and adopt approaches that best suit their needs.

Within education settings it is mandatory for all pupils aged 13 and over to wear a face covering on public transport. It is also strongly recommended that all pupils, regardless of age, should wear a face covering on all buses, trains or taxis for the journey to school where it is appropriate for them to do so and they are able to handle them as directed.

Face coverings must be worn in staff rooms and during adult to adult meetings lasting more than 15 minutes and by adults visiting the school site.

Face coverings are strongly encouraged for activities that entail large numbers of staff or pupils within an enclosed space where social distancing is not possible.

It is recommended that pupils and teachers wear a face covering in corridors and other communal areas of post-primary schools.

Given the risk mitigations in place in schools to limit and contain the spread of COVID-19, face coverings are not generally recommended for routine use in schools. Staff and pupils may wish to use them during the routine school day and this is acceptable. Schools should also be aware that some persons (including children) are exempt from wearing face coverings.

It is not mandatory for pupils to wear face coverings in school and no child will be excluded from school for not wearing a mask. Some schools have taken the decision to make masks mandatory however that is an operational issue for the individual schools.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what guidance has been provided Special Educational Needs Schools in relation to the wearing of Personal Protection Equipment of teaching and support staff.

(AQW 8083/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department issued CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in NI on 28 September.

This guidance sets out the circumstances in which PPE is required in section 2 paragraphs 20-22. Which state:

20. The PHA has published guidance to support safe working in educational settings in Northern Ireland. This advises that routine use of PPE within education settings is not required other than for certain tasks deemed to be of higher risk of transmission.
23. PPE is only needed in a very small number of cases. These are;
 - working with children, young people and pupils whose care routinely already involves the use of PPE, due to their intimate care needs; and
 - giving children medication.

PPE in the following situations means:

- fluid-resistant surgical face masks;
 - disposable gloves;
 - disposable plastic aprons; and
 - eye protection (for example a face visor or goggles).
24. Where PPE is recommended, this means that;
 - a facemask should be worn if a distance of 2m cannot be maintained from someone with symptoms of COVID-19 (symptomatic children should not be in
 - if contact is necessary, gloves, an apron and a facemask should be worn; and
 - if a risk assessment determines that there is a risk of fluids entering the eye (e.g. from coughing, spitting or vomiting), eye protection should also be worn.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education (i) whether an Equality Impact Assessment was carried out on the terms of reference for the expert panel review on educational underachievement; and (ii) if not, why not.

(AQW 8100/17-22)

Mr Weir: The establishment of an Expert Panel in respect of persistent educational underachievement was subject to an equality screening process and the policy was screened out. A copy of the screening document can be found on the DE web-site at:

https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/completed-s75-screening-appointment-of-an-expert-panel-to-identify-act._.pdf

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Education what education is given in secondary schools on drug and alcohol misuse.

(AQW 8109/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schools have a statutory duty to deliver Drugs Education (which includes legal and illegal substances) as part of the statutory curriculum for Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary level and Learning for Life and Work at post-primary level and have access to a range of curricular guidance and teaching support materials on this subject. In

2015 Revised Drugs Guidance for schools was published by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). The guidance is designed to reflect current legislation, technological advances and societal changes and it provides the context for why and how drug education should be addressed in schools.

As in all areas of the curriculum, schools are best placed to make decisions about which resources to use to address the needs of children and young people.

The Department's "iMatter" Programme (introduced during 2013) includes resources to support the entire school community at post primary level to be engaged in promoting resilient emotional health. A range of posters and leaflets provide information on coping with emotional issues, including 'Alcohol, drugs and solvents' and signposts to other organisations for further support. The Department is currently reviewing the "iMatter" resources with a view to enhancing the contents.

I can also confirm that over the last four years, the Department of Justice has supported the Lyric Theatre in taking their "Blackout" play to secondary schools across Northern Ireland, building on work in previous years reaching out to young people at Hydebank Wood Secure College and Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre.

"Blackout" is a short play performed by Lyric Theatre actors, followed by a question and answer discussion with some young people in the criminal justice system about their experiences. The target audience is young people and the play aims to develop awareness of the consequences of substance misuse, offending and other relevant themes.

My Department has also supported the production of the Blackout play financially, to a very small degree last year and would be happy to do so again if required.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the start date for building work for Priory College, Hollywood.
(AQW 8114/17-22)

Mr Weir: Based on the current programme, construction work for Priory Integrated College, Hollywood, is expected to commence on site by spring 2023. Capital Projects are complex by their very nature and a variety of factors can contribute to delays which cumulatively impact on delivery of a project. The programme will be regularly reviewed as the project progresses.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to reduce class sizes to stop the further spread of COVID-19.
(AQW 8201/17-22)

Mr Weir: Currently I have no plans to reduce class sizes.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education to detail the guidance that will advise whether to close schools again.
(AQW 8202/17-22)

Mr Weir: Currently there are no plans to close schools. I am therefore planning for education delivered in education settings to continue as long as possible.

In the event of any period of disruption to attendance at schools and educational settings, in order to support parents and pupils, my Department has provided a list of useful resources in assisting children with learning in a period of disruption to schools due to Covid-19 (coronavirus).

In addition supporting learning guidance has been issued by the EA. The guidance aims to support for teachers and parents working together so that pupils continue to learn at home and through school.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the impact on access to integrated education in Bangor with the potential new build of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School at Balloo/Gransha.
(AQW 8276/17-22)

Mr Weir: Through Fresh Start funding, my Department is delivering a hugely significant capital investment of almost £10m in Bangor Central Integrated Primary School.

This project will provide a brand new single-storey school with modern facilities fully compliant with my Department's School Building Handbook. The school will be built on a new site which is 1.7 miles from the existing school site and is situated in an easily accessible part of the town with sufficient room for future expansion. The construction work will be able to take place without causing any disruption to the ongoing operation of the school.

I would expect that the new facilities will enhance the provision of integrated education in the North Down area and support the future growth of the sector.

Department of Finance

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance, in relation to internal recruitment campaigns at Stage 3- Across Government, that allow Northern Ireland civil servants to be considered for roles in the UK Civil Service (UKCS) as internal candidates, while UK civil servants cannot apply on the same basis as internal candidates for Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) roles, whether he plans to address recruitment disparities between the NICS and the UKCS.

(AQW 7165/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): This matter is being fully considered in the context of a fundamental review of the Civil Service approach to talent management, workforce planning, recruitment, selection and vacancy management.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance how the (i) £50.2 million for personal protective equipment; (ii) £8.1 million for the transport sector; (iii) £2.2 million for ferry operators; and (iv) £124 million for the pending economic recovery strategy, centrally held by his Department, will be spent.

(AQW 7192/17-22)

Mr Murphy: £2.2 million is held centrally to transfer to the Department for Transport in England as the Executive's contribution to the Ferry Support Package, pending final cost assessments.

The remainder of the centrally held funding is for the Executive to allocate and decisions on this funding will be made shortly in line with local needs and priorities.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance what progress has been made on implementing the recommendations of the 2019 Northern Ireland Audit Office report on Major Capital Projects.

(AQW 7388/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Audit Office report on Major Capital Projects from December 2019 is the subject of a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) enquiry which commenced in March 2020.

It is normal practice to wait for PAC to publish its recommendations so as not to pre-empt the outcome of the enquiry. When the PAC recommendations are published, I will ensure that any recommendations, on the role of procurement in the delivery of major capital projects, are taken up by the Procurement Board.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the recent Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey, which outlined sixteen racial groups for respondents but coded them into categories white and other.

(AQW 7454/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBAS) is a very important school-based survey conducted among 11-16 year-olds, which covers a wide range of topics relevant to the lives of young people today. It is carried out regularly by NISRA's Central Survey Unit and is supported by eight government Departments. The most recent study saw more NI post primary schools participate than ever before, with just over 8,100 pupils being interviewed in the period September 2019 to February 2020.

A question on ethnic group is routinely included in the YPBAS questionnaire. In the most recent round, 8% of pupils gave an answer other than 'White' with some responses falling into each of the 15 alternative categories (see Table 1 in Annex A). Almost 190 pupils gave a response in one of 4 separate 'mixed/multiple ethnic group' categories. Three categories had less than 10 respondents and many of the others had less than 50 respondents.

The full YPBAS dataset is supplied to each of the sponsoring departments to analyse and report on their specific areas of interest. While NISRA publishes an Overview of YBAS results, it has not published any analysis from YPBAS relating to ethnicity. The YPBAS dataset will subsequently be deposited in the Data Archive for access by a wide range of researchers.

When it comes to analysing survey data, researchers are often limited by the number of respondents providing responses, particularly to questions used to identify sub-groups within the sample. In YPBAS, most of the individual ethnic group categories do not contain sufficient numbers to be used separately in analysis. In addition, some questionnaire modules are only asked on one version of the questionnaire, so the numbers responding will be roughly half the full sample. It is then up to researchers to determine how best to aggregate ethnic group categories to match the aims of their research.

ANNEX A - Table 1 – Ethnic group as indicated by respondent

Ethnic Group	Frequency	Percent
White	7,331	90.3%
Irish Traveller	145	1.8%
Mixed/Multiple ethnic group - White and Black Caribbean	46	0.6%
Mixed/Multiple ethnic group - White and Black African	39	0.5%
Mixed/Multiple ethnic group - White and Asian	43	0.5%

Ethnic Group	Frequency	Percent
Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background	61	0.8%
Indian	48	0.6%
Pakistani	27	0.3%
Bangladeshi	8	0.1%
Chinese	48	0.6%
Any other Asian background	32	0.4%
African	38	0.5%
Caribbean	5	0.1%
Any other Black/African/Caribbean background	6	0.1%
Arab	21	0.3%
Any other ethnic group	80	1.0%
Refusal	29	0.4%
Don't Know	111	1.4%
Total	8,118	100.0%

*Please note that this table is based on unweighted responses.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance to detail, for each of the last five years, the occasions on which Barnett consequentialia were used for (i) the same; or (ii) a similar purpose from which the funding originated.

(AQW 7462/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Barnett consequentialia are unencumbered and it is for the Executive to utilise the funding in line with local needs and priorities. Barnett consequentialia arising from a Spending Round or Spending Review are calculated at a departmental level in Whitehall and therefore it is not possible to distinguish individual programmes or projects.

In addition, for other fiscal events Barnett consequentialia form a part of the overall funding available to the Executive and it is not possible to disaggregate how Barnett consequentialia were specifically utilised.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance how much of the additional monies spent on railways in Great Britain since March 2020 has been distributed to Northern Ireland as Barnett consequentialia.[R]

(AQW 7571/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Up to July, Barnett consequentialia of £116.1 million related to transport have been provided to the Executive.

The UK Government's Guarantee announced on 24 July 2020 provided a minimum of £2.2 billion for the Executive's COVID-19 response. This meant however Barnett has not been applied in the usual way and therefore it is not possible to determine the exact consequentialia included from subsequent announcements.

Work is ongoing with Treasury, to determine how funding under the Guarantee compares with what would have been provided via Barnett consequentialia, however that work has not yet concluded.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance whether she has engaged with Belfast International Airport on how the £2.3 million Air Passenger Duty rebate, being returned annually to HM Treasury, could be used to establish essential long range international air links.

(AQW 7606/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am responding given my Department's responsibility for engaging with the Treasury on tax devolution matters.

The £2.3m allocation for APD in the Budget reflects the Block Grant Adjustment (BGA) that was applied in 2020/21. The BGA was agreed at the time of devolution in 2012 and is required under state aid rules which dictate that the Assembly must bear the financial consequences of devolving any tax. Therefore, those monies are not available for allocation by the Executive.

The Department for the Economy can advise what wider action it has been taking to support and enhance the North's air connectivity from its own budget.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance how she is supporting people in receipt of housing benefit to pay domestic rates who lost their income due to COVID-19 after their rates bill had been issued.

(AQW 7702/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services (LPS) administer Housing Benefit (Rates) on behalf of the Department for Communities in accordance with The Housing Benefit Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 for ratepayers who own and occupy domestic properties.

The administration of Housing Benefit (Rates) is subject to means assessments that take into consideration changes in earnings on a regular basis. LPS also administer Low Income Rate Relief as additional support to homeowners whose circumstances mean they are unable to obtain full relief from Rates through Housing Benefit by offering a more generous thresholds on savings and income taper.

Those in receipt of Housing Benefit (Rates) should notify LPS of changes in circumstances as soon as possible. LPS is willing to discuss alternative payment options for ratepayers in receipt of Housing Benefit (Rates) and Low Income Rate Relief where they remain liable for any shortfall in liability not covered by a rate relief scheme.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether she has any plans to introduce a COVID-19 sick payment scheme for hospitality workers.

(AQW 7784/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Statutory Sick Pay is paid by employers to employees, including hospitality workers, who are incapable of work due to sickness. It is paid at a flat rate of £95.85 for up to 28 weeks. To be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay, an individual must: be classed as an employee and have done some work for their employer; have been ill for at least 4 days in a row (including non-working days); earn an average of at least £120 per week; and tell their employer that they are sick before the employer's deadline, or within 7 days if the employer has not set a deadline.

A number of amendments have been made to Statutory Sick Pay in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes extend Statutory Sick Pay to those who need to self-isolate for medical reasons to protect others. The three day waiting period for Statutory Sick Pay has also been temporarily removed meaning that Statutory Sick Pay, where an eligible individual is sick or self-isolating due to COVID-19 will be available from day one.

Amendments were also made to provide that a person who has been advised by the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well Being that they have had contact with a person who is symptomatic or has tested positive for COVID-19, and that they should stay at home and self-isolate as a result, is deemed to be incapable of work and therefore entitled to Statutory Sick Pay.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his Department's work on a social value bill; and for a timeline for the progression of such legislation.

(AQW 7880/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It is one of my priorities to ensure social value is a key feature of public procurement particularly to help local communities to manage and recover from the impact of COVID-19.

I will be reconvening the Procurement Board in November and social value will be discussed, including the need for a Social Value Bill. The Procurement Board will consider legislation and refreshed policy on this subject.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether existing Capital Borrowing powers can be utilised to cover voluntary redundancies offered by (i) Northern Ireland Civil Service; and (ii) arm's-length bodies.[R]

(AQW 7947/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Existing capital borrowing powers cannot be utilised to cover voluntary redundancy schemes without the express permission of the Treasury.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the failure to appoint a Head of the Civil Service, (i) were each of the candidates regarded as unsuitable for appointment by both Ministers; and (ii) were the Ministers unable to agree on a suitable appointee.

(AQW 8008/17-22)

Mr Murphy: To ensure the protection of personal data and the privacy of individual candidates, information on suitability is not disclosable under the terms of the Data Protection Act 2018.

In line with agreed policy and process, the final selection decision for HOCS appointment was an interview based on the NICS competency framework with a requirement for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to reach an agreed ranking of all successful candidates (through agreed scores) allowing the top scoring candidate to be identified.

Regrettably, the First Minister and deputy First Minister were unable to reach agreement which would enable a HOCS appointment to be made.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance (i) to detail the Barnett consequential received as a result of the Green Homes Grant scheme recently announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer; and (ii) whether a similar scheme will be established in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 8157/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 5772 /17-22.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance what progress has been made in implementing the recommendations made by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Public Governance Review.
(AQO 795/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published its review of NI public sector governance in July 2016.

The recommendations of the OECD report have been embedded into governance and reporting structures. Ongoing progress in implementing the recommendations is captured as part of the overall reporting against the draft PfG Outcome Delivery Plans and Departmental Business Plans.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what priority is attached to finding the extra £4 million funding required this year by the Assembly Commission, arising out of its determination of 27 August 2020 on Assembly Members' expenses and allowances.

(AQO 796/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Assembly Commission has assessed the pressures arising from determinations on Assembly Members' expenses and allowances as inescapable.

The Audit Committee received a briefing on the budgetary implications of the determination covering members' allowances on 16 September 2020.

To reflect the independence of the Assembly, the Executive will, where possible, meet the funding requirements identified by the Assembly Commission where endorsed by the Audit Committee

The Assembly and Audit Committee are asked to have due regard for the overall public expenditure position when setting the Assembly's budget.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the PEACE PLUS Programme.

(AQO 797/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A commitment has been made by the Irish and British Governments and the EU to fund a future PEACE Plus Programme for 2021-27. This programme currently has a value of approximately €650m.

The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) has been tasked with the development of a PEACE PLUS programme. SEUPB undertook an extensive stakeholder engagement exercise earlier this year which was open to all external stakeholders. Based on the information collected and liaison with departments North and South, it has now produced initial draft proposals for the programme which has been presented to and has been endorsed by the Executive and the Irish Government.

SEUPB is continuing to work with the relevant stakeholders to develop the programme further to ensure it can be ready to go out to public consultation later this year.

I would encourage all interested stakeholders to take the opportunity to input to this consultation to ensure that we develop a programme that best meets the needs of our community.

Following public consultation, the programme will then need to be finalised and presented to the Executive, the Irish Government and the North South Ministerial Council for agreement and, once approved, will form the basis for agreeing a final programme with the EU Commission.

It is hoped that a final approved programme will be ready to open early in 2021.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Finance for an update on whether multi-year budgets will be in place from 2021-22, as contained in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQO 798/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am keen to deliver a multi-year Budget for 2021-22 onwards and am currently working on that basis.

However, the Executive's funding envelope will be determined by the outcome of Treasury's Spending Review. As a result the period for which the Executive can agree a Budget will be restricted by the period covered by the Spending Review.

While Treasury had previously indicated that the Spending Review would cover three years for Resource DEL and four years Capital DEL this was thrown into doubt by the recent announcement that there would be no Autumn Budget.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance for an update on forward planning for Executive underspend to ensure that resources are utilised in a way that maximises expenditure.

(AQO 800/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There is no doubt that this is a particularly challenging year. That is why I have joined with my counterparts in Scotland and Wales in pressing the Treasury for additional flexibilities to help manage the financial position.

Notwithstanding that, there are a number of existing mechanisms available to the Executive to minimise underspends and ensure resources are used effectively.

Firstly, departments are aware when bidding for Covid related funding that any allocations are for 2020-21 only and must be used in this year.

There are two remaining in-year monitoring rounds this year, in October and January, which will allow the Executive to reallocate underspends according to its priorities.

Of course, departments are required to identify any reduced requirements at the earliest opportunity without waiting until a formal monitoring round.

In addition departments provide monthly outturn and forecast outturn returns to DoF. If accurately completed these should help identify any areas of potential underspend. This information is shared with the Finance Committee.

The Executive has carried out a number of bespoke exercises outside that of the standard monitoring round process in response to COVID-19 and is able to do so again should this be deemed necessary

In addition, in the June Monitoring round Departments were given extra flexibility to reallocate their non COVID-19 budgets and that will again be the case in October monitoring. The additional flexibility will assist Ministers to respond dynamically to the impact of COVID in their respective departments.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Finance whether he plans to change Civil Service advice in relation to working from home.

(AQO 801/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No not at this time.

The approach of the Executive has been that office based staff that can work from home should continue to do so. The Executive's 5 Step Plan strongly encourages remote working. Hence the focus in the NICS remains on minimising the risk of transmission, ensuring that key public services continue to be delivered without interruption while helping to protect and not overburden the NHS.

Social distancing has proven to be the most effective means of preventing the spread of the virus. As a result the number of staff who can safely work within our offices has been considerably reduced as we maintain social distancing in the workplace. This measure is likely to be in place for some time while the risk of transmission remains high.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Finance when he will be in a position to allocate the £33 million funding package for the arts sector.

(AQO 802/17-22)

Mr Murphy: At the Executive meeting on 24th September 2020, I am happy to report that the Executive agreed to allocate £29 million to DfC for cultural recovery.

Given that the Executive previously allocated £4 million for the Cultural Resilience Fund, it means that an additional £33 million has been allocated to the sector.

While it is for the Executive to determine how funding received through the Barnett is utilised, in this instance the allocation exceeds the £32.6 million Barnett consequential received as a result of allocations to Culture, Arts and Heritage in England.

Department of Health

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Valley Nursing Home, following the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority inspection.

(AQW 1096/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): On 27 January 2020, RQIA conducted an unannounced inspection at Valley Nursing Home, Clogher. RQIA's inspection team remained concerned about the poor quality of care at this home, however there was no immediate risk to its patients. On 28 January the current registered provider (Mr Paul Warren-Gray, Valley Nursing Home (MPS) Ltd) notified RQIA of his intention to cancel his registration. A new provider with a proven track record in achieving significant improvement in other homes has advised RQIA of its intention to apply for the registration of this service. RQIA will consider this provider's application and plans to deliver the required improvements at this service, to ensure the safety and wellbeing of every patient at Valley Nursing Home.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether his Department will consider extending the deadline for pharmacies to supply documentation relating to grant money spent on alterations to their premises during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 4989/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) requires assurances from pharmacy contractors in relation to the additional funding that was provided for premises adaptations and staff costs due to the outbreak of COVID-19. This funding related to the period March to June 2020 and the closing date for return of completed assurance templates was originally Friday 19th June.

However, the HSCB recognises that there are circumstances regarding why a pharmacy contractor would have been unable to meet these deadlines and continues to be willing to discuss extensions to submissions of returns on an individual basis. Contractors seeking extensions should contact their local Integrated Care office at the HSCB.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 4136/17-22, (i) why the personal protection equipment (PPE) was allowed to expire; (ii) who is responsible for monitoring the expiry date of these PPE stocks; and (iii) whether the certification is copied to the end user.

(AQW 5646/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i) & (ii) The Department of Health is responsible for the management of PPE in the emergency stockpile and continually monitors the expiry dates of all items in the stockpile. The Department's practice in relation to items in the emergency stockpile is not to dispose of expired stock until new stock is received.

A UK-wide procurement exercise to replace the expired respirators in the emergency stockpile was delayed as the decision as to whether to purchase valved or unvalved respirators was to be based on the outcome of a tolerability study as recommended by the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG). It was agreed that mutual aid principles between the four nations were to be invoked should respirators be required before a new procurement exercise could be undertaken early in 2020.

(iii) Following stringent quality assurance testing, Inspec International confirmed in March 2020 that the expired FFP3 respirators were fit for purpose and safe for use by staff in the NHS. The Department of Health communicated this by letter to all HSC Trusts on 31st March 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the timescale and development of an autism strategy beyond 2020.
(AQW 6252/17-22)

Mr Swann: Whilst preparations had been at an advanced stage for the next phase of cross-departmental and stakeholder engagement to agree future actions for a revised autism strategy for publication at the beginning of 2021, this work has been significantly constrained as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. My Department has, however, continued to engage with stakeholders via bilateral meetings and in July issued a public questionnaire to a range of organisations for circulation to inform key priorities for the future. I will shortly be writing to my Executive colleagues to update them on this work, and next steps.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health how many patients in each Health and Social Care Trust are awaiting a care in the community provider.

(AQW 6303/17-22)

Mr Swann: Please find information detailed below.

Table 1. Total number of persons waiting for a domiciliary care package by Health and Social Care Trust as at 31 August 2020.

HSC Trust	Persons waiting for a domiciliary care package as at 31 August 2020
Belfast	253
Northern	199
South Eastern	73
Southern	185
Western	380

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 1552/17-22, what action has been taken by his Department to ensure that the Regional Fertility Centre has capacity to meet the access to three cycles of fertility treatment, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 6354/17-22)

Mr Swann: I was pleased that the New Decade, New Approach agreement commits to providing a greater number of funded IVF cycles. I announced, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, plans to establish a Project Board to take forward this commitment.

Due to the essential temporary reconfiguration across the Health and Social Care system to ensure continuity of provision of essential healthcare services for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, progress on this important issue has unfortunately been temporarily delayed. Work on it continues however.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to list the criteria used by the joint biosecurity centre in relation to COVID-19 travel restrictions from a country and territory; and whether a separate recommendation is given to devolved regions.
(AQW 6414/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Joint Biosecurity Centre have set out on their website the methodology involved in compiling the information that is used to advise Ministers. This can be accessed through the following link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/joint-biosecurity-centre#covid-19-travel-corridors>. Data are provided by the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) and Public Health England for the whole of the UK and all 4 regions receive this same data.

Local information is then considered alongside the JBC data to inform decision making.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the urgent care cover in Strabane in each month of the last three years.
(AQW 6489/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below is a summary of GP OOH Cover in the Strabane Base from April 2017 to Aug 2020.

	Apr-17	May-17	Jun-17	Jul-17	Aug-17	Sep-17	Oct-17	Nov-17	Dec-17
Days	18	18	15	18	11	17	15	12	13
GPs/ ANPs	11	13	11	12	11	14	10	9	14
	Jan-18	Feb-18	Mar-18	Apr-18	May-18	Jun-18	Jul-18	Aug-18	Sep-18
Days	16	9	12	13	11	13	10	8	12
GPs / ANPs	11	10	12	11	13	9	7	6	7
	Oct-18	Nov-18	Dec-18	Jan-19	Feb-19	Mar-19	Apr-19	May-19	Jun-19
Days	10	11	17	9	8	8	10	10	9
GPs / ANPs	7	8	9	6	5	8	8	8	6
	Jul-19	Aug-19	Sep-19	Oct-19	Nov-19	Dec-19	Jan-20	Feb-20	Mar-20
Days	6	5	11	11	10	5	8	9	8
GPs / ANPs	5	3	5	6	5	5	6	5	4
	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20				
Days	12	16	13	11	14				
GPs/ANPs	5	5	3	3	4				

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health whether his Department records the number people who have had multiple tests for COVID-19; and how many people have been tested for COVID-19 to date.
(AQW 6528/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of people with multiple tests for COVID-19 is not available.

Information on the number of individuals (people) with a laboratory completed test is published by my Department on a daily basis on the DoH COVID-19 Dashboard at the link below:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health (i), given that Brackenburn Clinic has been unable to accept any new patients since 2018, why a review of Gender Identity Services was not undertaken in 2018 when the issue of lengthy waiting times was first identified; (ii) whether additional funding will be allocated to improve waiting times; (iii) what alternative supports are available to those currently on the waiting list; and (iv) whether he plans to liaise with Trans and LGBTQ+ charities and support groups to understand their experiences and expectations.
(AQW 6529/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- i In March 2019, my Department wrote to the Health and Social Care Board giving its approval for a review of the gender identity service to be undertaken however the Board had been meeting with the Belfast HSC Trust, which runs the Brackenburn Clinic, since January 2018 to address the issues facing the service.

- ii. The issues faced by the Gender Identity Service are not due to funding; demand for this service has increased significantly in recent years and the position has been compounded by staff departures and recruitment challenges.
- iii. The Belfast Trust has actively explored the possibility of referring patients to other NHS service providers in the UK however no providers have been identified with capacity to take patients from our waiting lists as they too are encountering increasing demand for such services.
- iv. I met with representatives of the LGBTQ community on 16th September and discussed issues concerning the Gender Identity Service and the Transgender community.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what funding is available for the provision of guide dogs to charities that provide them to members of the public.

(AQW 6535/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has no funding available for the provision of guide dogs to members of the public.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health (i) whether he has any plans to approve the use of Trikafta/Kaftrio for the treatment of cystic fibrosis via the Health Service; (ii) if approved, when the drug will be available to patients; and (iii) under what conditions will it be licenced for use on the Health Service.

(AQW 6573/17-22)

Mr Swann: I announced on 30 July 2020 that an agreement with Vertex Pharmaceuticals had been reached. Subsequently I welcomed the news that Kaftrio received its licence for use in Europe on 21 August 2020. I can also advise that the contractual process has been completed and that Kaftrio is now approved for use in the HSC.

A number of the most severely ill patients have already commenced treatment with Kaftrio. However, there are over 500 children and adults who suffer from cystic fibrosis in Northern Ireland. Not all will be clinically suitable for treatment with Kaftrio and not everyone can be treated immediately. Clinical teams are working on the prioritisation of those patients most likely to see the greatest benefit.

The current EU license provides that eligible patients – aged 12 or over who have two copies of the F508del mutation gene, or one copy of F508del and a minimal function mutation – may be suitable for treatment with Kaftrio. In addition, the Vertex agreement provides for a number of additional patients with genetic mutations assessed as requiring ‘off label’ (off-license) use of the new regime. A clinically led panel will be established at Trust level to support the assessment and suitability of such patients for treatment.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health how many people have requested a COVID-19 test and have not been able to (i) access a test; and (ii) access a test within three days.

(AQW 6807/17-22)

Mr Swann: The National Testing Programme is managed by the Department of Health and Social Care in England.

My officials are advised that the information sought is not currently available in the format requested.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what funding arrangements have been established to cover the immediate and future costs of the Refractory Epilepsy Service Specialist Clinical Advice Service recommended medication for Billy Caldwell.

(AQW 6846/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not appropriate that I comment or discuss the treatment being provided to any patient.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail the type and cost of anti-depressants prescribed to children and young people under care by social services; and how these are controlled when a child or young person is in care.

(AQW 6850/17-22)

Mr Swann: Details regarding the types and costs of anti-depressants that are prescribed to children and young people who are specifically under the care of social services are not held centrally.

Clinicians prescribing anti-depressants for children are however expected to do so responsibly and in line with the relevant National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines. The NICE guidelines for ‘Depression in children and young people: identification and management’ sets out clear guidance on the identification and management of depression in children and young people aged between five and eighteen years.

Based on the stepped care model, the guidance makes clear the need for treatment to be based on the individual needs of children and young people, the characteristics of their depression and their personal and social circumstances. This helps support healthcare professionals, children, young people and their parent(s)/carer(s) in identifying and accessing the most effective interventions.

My Department endorsed this NICE guidance (NG134) in August 2019 (insofar as it updated and replaced CG28 – see HSC (SQSD) (NICE NG134) 27/19). Details regarding this can be found on the Department’s website at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/nice-endorsed-clinical-guidelines-20192020>

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health when the findings of the latest five year old children's oral health survey will be published.

(AQW 6875/17-22)

Mr Swann: A dental survey of Northern Ireland 5 Year Old Children took place between January 2019 and April 2019. This was the first dental survey in Northern Ireland for six years so a considerable amount of training and preparation was required to put the necessary arrangements in place.

Nine teams from the community dental services across all five trusts underwent training and calibration. In total 1142 children received a dental examination as part of the survey. The data collected has been validated and a report of the results has been drafted. The draft report now needs to be quality assured. Unfortunately, over the last six months many routine dental projects have been paused as efforts are focused on dealing with the effects of Coronavirus on dental services.

It is hoped that a finalised version of the report will be ready for publication later this year.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 2155/17-22, to detail his actions on establishing a Paediatric Pathology service and enabling access to a service from Dublin.

(AQW 6879/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department remains committed to exploring the potential of the development of an all-island paediatric pathology service in the longer term.

However, due to the reprioritisation of resources in both jurisdictions, in order to ensure continuity of provision of essential healthcare services for the duration of the pandemic, to protect patients, and to free up stretched resources, it has not been possible to progress this matter further in the interim.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health what percentage of current COVID-19 cases have their origins from (i) close contact from travel; (ii) close contact via a workplace setting; and (iii) community transmission.

(AQW 6904/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information is not currently available in the format requested.

The Public Health Agency are currently updating their systems to allow them to present this information in future.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the proposal to install secure perspex visiting rooms in care homes; and whether capital grants will be made available to provide this service.

(AQW 6945/17-22)

Mr Swann: Officials are considering such a proposal amongst a number of others. This includes running a swift pilot to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of these Perspex visiting rooms before wider implementation.

Arrangements for funding such a proposal are currently being considered.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what assurances he can give that the supply of medicines and medical products to patients will continue uninterrupted in the case of a no deal Brexit.

(AQW 6972/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can confirm that my Department's priority is to maintain the ongoing supply of medicines and medical products to the people of Northern Ireland following the end of the Transition Period in January 2021.

The whole of the United Kingdom (UK) is currently aligned with the European Union (EU) acquis for medicines and medical devices. This will change after transition when NI will remain aligned with the EU and Great Britain (GB) will not. This has implications for both the supply and regulation of medicines in Northern Ireland. Medicines are regulated on a UK-wide basis and NI currently draws over 98% of its medicines supplies from the UK market via GB.

In relation to EU transition planning, the overall responsibility for the continuity of supply of medicines in the UK rests with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). A multi-layered approach to national contingencies has been established to mitigate the risk of reaching the end of transition without an agreement. In addition to national contingencies, the Department is working with DHSC to ensure that additional mitigations are taken, where needed, in the context of the NI protocol.

Medicines shortages can and do sometimes occur for a variety of reasons unrelated to exiting the EU. Northern Ireland has well-established procedures to deal with medicine shortages. My Department has worked with the HSC to strengthen existing arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and are currently working with the other UK Administrations.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether treatment for ovarian cancer will restart as quickly and safely as possible, including the setting up of specific treatment sites where surgery can continue in the event of a second wave of COVID-19.

(AQW 7001/17-22)

Mr Swann: Ovarian cancer red flag gynaecology clinics and all ovarian cancer surgery continued at COVID-protected sites within Health and Social Care Trusts and independent sector hospitals throughout the pandemic surge, albeit with reduced throughput. COVID-protected sites will permit surgery to continue in the event of a second wave of COVID-19.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what assurances he can give that all the required information relating to the Public Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital has been secured.

(AQW 7050/17-22)

Mr Swann: In anticipation of an Inquiry, the Chief Social Services Officer and the Chief Nursing Officer wrote jointly to HSC Chief Executives and also to my Department's staff on 5 February requiring that all necessary steps be taken to preserve any documents, records and other material relevant to the events at Muckamore Abbey Hospital, so that these will be available promptly on request when required.

As I have already indicated, the programme of work to establish the Inquiry will take some time, and is not work that can be rushed.

My officials are currently preparing advice on potential candidates for the Chair of the Inquiry for my consideration, with appropriate input from professional, regulatory and other bodies in the Learning Disability field. The Chair must have the appropriate skills and expertise to discharge their duties effectively, and their impartiality must be beyond doubt.

I expect to be in a position to appoint the Chair later this autumn, and on their appointment I will consult with them about the appointment of other panel members and the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry.

I also intend to engage with current and former patients of the hospital and their families to hear their views on the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the process, criteria and timeframe for (i) appointing a chairperson; and (ii) drafting the terms of reference for the Public Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

(AQW 7051/17-22)

Mr Swann: In anticipation of an Inquiry, the Chief Social Services Officer and the Chief Nursing Officer wrote jointly to HSC Chief Executives and also to my Department's staff on 5 February requiring that all necessary steps be taken to preserve any documents, records and other material relevant to the events at Muckamore Abbey Hospital, so that these will be available promptly on request when required.

As I have already indicated, the programme of work to establish the Inquiry will take some time, and is not work that can be rushed.

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I expect to be in a position to appoint the Chair later this autumn, and on their appointment I will consult with them about the appointment of other panel members and the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry.

I also intend to engage with current and former patients of the hospital and their families to hear their views on the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) location; (ii) date; and (iii) duration of deployment of each COVID-19 mobile testing unit used by the (a) Southern Health and Social Care Trust; and (b) South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 7073/17-22)

Mr Swann: Mobile Testing Units are deployed across Northern Ireland in response to local demand for testing by the Public Health Agency working together with partners in the National Testing Programme managed by the Department in the Department for Health & Social Care in London.

In the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area, Mobile Testing Units have also been deployed to:

Location	Dates
Newry	26th – 27th September 2020
Newry	9th – 12th June 2020
Newry	25th July – 6th August 2020
Newry	15th – 19th September 2020
Newry	7th – 31st August 2020
Newry	1st – 13th September 2020

Location	Dates
Armagh	14th – 27th September 2020

In the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area, Mobile Testing Units have also been deployed to:

Location	Dates
Lisburn	6th – 10th July 2020
Lisburn	15th – 31st August 2020
Lisburn	1st – 13th September 2020
Downpatrick	2nd – 12th July 2020
Downpatrick	14th – 24th July 2020
Newcastle	7th – 19th August 2020
Newcastle	23rd – 24th August 2020
Newtownards	17th – 31st August 2020
Newtownards	1st – 11th September 2020

Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is still actively seeking to recruit a paediatric pathologist. (AQW 7092/17-22)

Mr Swann: Belfast HSC Trust has undertaken four national and international recruitment campaigns since July 2015. An open-ended recruitment process with an agency specialising in international recruitment was ongoing, however, this was temporarily suspended in March 2020 due to the response across the HSC system to COVID-19. At that time no suitably qualified candidate had been identified. My Department has recently reinstated the regional international recruitment project and the Belfast HSC Trust has confirmed it will be pursuing the recruitment of paediatric pathologists again with the agencies involved.

In the meantime, an interim arrangement with Alder Hey Hospital in Liverpool ensures that a perinatal and paediatric pathology service for hospital consented post-mortem examinations can continue to be offered.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what progress reports (i) he has requested of his Department's racial equality champion since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020; and (ii) his Department's racial equality champion has provided since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020. (AQW 7120/17-22)

(AQW 7120/17-22)

Mr Swann: Progress reports by the Racial Equality Champion are by way of input to Executive Office papers for Racial Equality Champions Network meetings, and verbally at meetings.

Whilst I have not requested any progress reports since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020, I have been made aware of issues arising on racial equality matters by way of submissions in respect of correspondence received.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health (i) how many elective surgeries were carried out, in each of the last five years; and (ii) how many operations for elective surgery have been cancelled in the COVID-19 period. (AQW 7147/17-22)

(AQW 7147/17-22)

Mr Swann: The term 'surgery' is not used on any of the hospital data collection systems or data submissions that are used to monitor activity. We therefore use appointments and operations as approximations. Table A overleaf refers to the number of elective surgeries carried out in HSC Hospital in Northern Ireland in the last five years.

Table A: The number of Elective Admissions to HSC Hospitals in Northern Ireland for an Operation, 2015/16 - 2019/20

Trust	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast	92,732	96,423	92,850	93,268	83,056
Northern	29,867	30,868	29,511	29,808	28,120
Southern	34,522	38,026	37,725	34,329	25,007
South Eastern	32,036	34,175	33,794	37,238	34,837
Western	36,803	36,362	35,970	36,617	36,669

Trust	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Total	225,960	235,854	229,850	231,260	207,689

Source: P9 Cancelled Operations Return

Table B refers to the number of cancelled elective appointments in HSC Hospitals in Northern Ireland within the COVID-19 period.

Table B: The Number of Cancelled Elective Appointments¹ in HSC Hospitals in Northern Ireland between 18th March 2020 and 17th September 2020

Trust	Cancelled Elective Inpatient Appointments	Cancelled Elective Daycase Appointments	Total Cancelled Appointments
Belfast	385	3,890	4,275
Northern	150	1,626	1,776
Southern	135	1,461	1,596
South Eastern	120	2,235	2,355
Western	303	1,436	1,739
Total	1,093	10,648	11,741

Source: Daily SitRep Report

1 This is the total number of cancelled elective appointments and includes surgeries and other procedures, such as diagnostics tests.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what progress has been made to develop COVID-19-protected sites where cancer treatment and diagnostic tests can be performed safely.

(AQW 7187/17-22)

Mr Swann: In June I published the Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care (HSC) Services which identified cancer as a key priority, recognising the adverse impact of COVID-19 on referral and treatment waiting times.

Under this Framework each Trust has produced plans to reset cancer services as quickly as possible by amongst other measures maximising the utilisation of COVID-19 protected capacity within HSC Trusts and the independent sector. The aim is to provide care settings which are as safe as possible for both staff and patients, whilst taking into account the potential need to respond to a further pandemic surge.

The Framework and associated Trust plans are available on my Department's website at www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/rebuilding-HSC-services.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health when the artificial eye clinic will restart.

(AQW 7194/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to the onset of the current COVID-19 pandemic all Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSC) outpatient appointments were cancelled with immediate effect on 19 March 2020. From that date, only emergency or clinically urgent consultations were permitted to take place.

However, the regional Artificial Eye Service, which is based at the Shankill Wellbeing and Treatment Centre, has implemented an innovative drive-through service, in order to see patients that require urgent maintenance of their prosthesis. When the patient arrives staff take the prosthesis into the clinic facility for maintenance and, after work has been completed, return it to the patient who remains in their car throughout.

BHSC are currently carrying out a risk assessment and are planning to restart the Artificial Eye Service as soon as possible, with the aim of recommencing by the end of October 2020.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to introduce new guidance for people who had previously been shielding until 31 July 2020.

(AQW 7201/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that this continues to be a difficult time for many people in our community including those who may have an underlying condition which means they are more clinically vulnerable to the impact of Covid-19.

New health protection regulations came into force across Northern Ireland from 22 September 2020. The overriding aim of these restrictions is to keep household-to-household contact low to help reduce the spread of Covid-19.

The need for further specific advice for those who were previously shielding is being kept under continuous review. However, at this point in time, there is no change to the decision to pause shielding which came into effect from 1st August 2020.

I believe that it is important that we seek to achieve as balanced an approach as possible. **There is always a degree of risk in contacts with the outside world but remaining indoors indefinitely is also detrimental to physical and mental health. Whilst shielding has not been reactivated,** I would encourage clinically vulnerable and older people to be particularly careful in following the advice on limiting household contacts, social distancing, hand washing and wearing a face covering. In addition, it is vital that everyone in our community plays their part in keeping themselves and others safe by following the public health advice and adhering to the new regulations.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how many people in each Health and Social Care Trust are waiting for (i) routine; and (ii) emergency cataract surgery, broken down by length of time on the waiting list.
(AQW 7215/17-22)

Mr Swann: On the 30th June 2020, there were 5,771 patients waiting for cataract treatment, of which 5,130 were waiting for routine procedures and 641 were waiting for urgent procedures. These cases are broken down by HSC Trust and number of weeks waiting in Table 1 overleaf.

Table 1: Number of patients waiting for Cataract Surgery as at 30th June 2020

	HSC Trust	Number of Weeks Waiting						Total Waiting
		0-6 weeks	6-13 weeks	13-21 weeks	21-26 weeks	26-52 weeks	>52 weeks	
Routine	Belfast	10	5	60	43	239	284	641
	Northern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	South Eastern	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Southern	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
	Western	5	5	229	239	975	780	2,233
	DPC	62	19	328	261	1,008	575	2,253
	Total Routine	77	29	617	543	2,222	1,642	5,130
Urgent	Belfast	21	10	32	29	79	14	185
	Northern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	South Eastern	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	Southern	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	Western	2	1	21	12	23	7	66
	DPC	48	13	121	86	104	16	388
	Total Urgent	71	24	175	127	207	37	641
Total Waiting		148	53	792	670	2,429	1,679	5,771

Source: DoH Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what discussions he has had with his counterpart in Scotland in relation to the work on mesh implants by Dr Veronikis; and how he plans to share the learnings with local clinicians.
(AQW 7252/17-22)

Mr Swann: Officials from Scottish Government have advised my officials that Dr Veronikis has withdrawn his offer to visit Scotland in relation to mesh surgeries. There is therefore no relevant learning at this time.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the adequacy of ambulance cover for Belfast and the surrounding areas on 13 and 14 September 2020.
(AQW 7253/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 13 and 14 September 2020 there was reduced ambulance cover in the Belfast Division. The significant challenges in the provision of ambulance cover across the region due to vacancies, sickness, absence related to COVID-19, planned annual leave and other staff pressures, regrettably leads to times when there will be reduced cover in certain areas.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) takes all possible steps to provide the maximum level of cover possible at such times, such as managing calls dynamically across the region, extending paramedic hours, using non-emergency crews

and private ambulance services. While NIAS continues to recruit and train additional staff, I have made it clear that only significant additional investment will address these ongoing issues.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the cost to his Department of renting private buildings in town and city centres, in each year since 2015.

(AQW 7264/17-22)

Mr Swann: The total annual property rental cost to the Department (including Arm's Length Bodies) is shown below. Given the high number of leases held, to disaggregate this information into city centre and town would require disproportionate time, effort and cost.

2015/16	£4.901m
2016/17	£4.962m
2017/18	£4.944m
2018/19	£5.362m
2019/20	not yet finalised

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health (i) when Dr Michael Watt ceased to be an employee of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) under what circumstances did his employment by the Trust come to an end; and (iii) why this development was not made known to those patients who were harmed while under his care.

(AQW 7269/17-22)

Mr Swann: The retirement of Dr Michael Watt is a personnel matter with the decision taken by his employer, the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust, in line with normal procedures and contractual obligations. While I appreciate that the media reports of this decision will have caused distress to patients, it would not have been appropriate to publicly announce the outcome of a personnel matter.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to implement the nine recommendations of the First Do No Harm report; and, if so, when these recommendations will be implemented.

(AQW 7289/17-22)

Mr Swann: A departmental working group has been established to consider the recommendations and my Department's response to the report. This work is underway and I plan to provide a formal response to the report shortly.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the roll-out of Multi-Disciplinary Teams in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 7290/17-22)

Mr Swann: Within the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, primary care multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) are now in place in the Down GP Federation area. A total of 13 practices have a full complement of first contact social workers, social work assistants, mental health practitioners and physiotherapists in post, complemented by increased levels of district nursing and health visiting staff. These teams are providing care to a patient population of 76,685.

Within the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust efforts continue to progress the roll-out of the MDT model in the West Belfast GP Federation remit, to a practice population of 89,916. Currently all first contact physiotherapists have been recruited, with social workers and mental health practitioners also in place in some practices.

The pressures across health and social care caused by Covid-19 have necessitated a pause in further recruitment, while allowing existing MDTs to continue to provide services to their patients. Further expansion of the model will be dependent on availability of funding, a qualified and experienced workforce and the suitability of the primary care estate.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) location; (ii) date; and (iii) duration of the deployment of each COVID-19 mobile testing unit; and how many tests were carried out by each unit.

(AQW 7311/17-22)

Mr Swann:

Location	Dates	Total numbers tested
Omagh	21st – 27th May 2020	368
Ballymena	16th – 18th June 2020	278
Cookstown	19th – 20th June 2020	4
Ballymena	22nd – 5th July 2020	333

Location	Dates	Total numbers tested
Lisburn	6th – 10th July 2020	217
Lisburn	15th – 31st August 2020	3448
Lisburn	1st – 13th September 2020	2456
Loughmoss	14th – 18th September 2020	1337
QUB Belfast	19th – 20th September 2020	487
Loughmoss	21st – 25th September 2020	1130
Newry	26th – 27th September 2020	364
Coleraine	28th May – 8th June 2020	242
Newry	9th – 12th June 2020	119
Downpatrick	2nd – 12th July 2020	132
Downpatrick	14th – 24th July 2020	412
Newry	25th July – 6th August 2020	1208
Newcastle	7th – 19th August 2020	1304
Cranswick	20th – 21st August 2020	360
Newcastle	23rd – 24th August 2020	134
Carryduff	25th – 28th August 2020	455
QUB Belfast	29th – 30th 31st August 2020	336
Loughmoss	1st – 4th September 2020	824
QUB Belfast	5th – 6th September 2020	314
Loughmoss	7th – 11th September 2020	778
QUB Belfast	12th- 14th September 2020	588
Newry	15th – 19th September 2020	1197
QUB Belfast	21st – 27th September 2020	1566
Ballymena	6th July – 17th August 2020	3741
Ballymoney	18th – 22nd August 2020	1154
Ballymena	23rd – 31st August 2020	1408
Ballymena	1st – 25th September 2020	4209
Strabane	26th – 27th September 2020	525
Limavady	17th July – 6th August 2020	1245
Newry	7th – 31st August 2020	2869
Newry	1st – 13th September 2020	2306
Armagh	14th – 27th September 2020	3021
Carrickfergus	3rd – 7th August 2020	258
Ballymena	8th August 2020	60
Carrickfergus	9th – 12th August 2020	227
Ballymena	13 -14th August 2020	71
Carrickfergus	16th – 31st August 2020	2616
Carrickfergus	1st – 4th September 2020	758
Antrim	5th – 27th September 2020	3363
QUB (3 sites)	10th – 14th August 2020	425
Newtownards	17th – 31st August 2020	2362
Newtownards	1st – 11th September 2020	2106
Crumlin	12th – 27th September 2020	1800

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people who have called (i) the 111 number for COVID-19 advice; and (ii) the 119 number to book a COVID-19 test, in each week since March 2020.

(AQW 7312/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of people who have called (i) the 111 number for COVID-19 advice is not available. However, information on the number of calls received each week from Northern Ireland since 1 March 2020 is detailed in the table below.

Number of calls from NI to the NHS 111 COVID-19 Helpline by Week

Week	No. of Calls*
01-Mar	137
02 Mar - 08 Mar	2,793
09 Mar - 15 Mar	18,970
16 Mar - 22 Mar	27,817
23 Mar - 29 Mar	19,072
30 Mar - 05 Apr	9,102
06 Apr - 12 Apr	5,463
13 Apr - 19 Apr	3,712
20 Apr - 26 Apr	2,701
27 Apr - 03 May	2,628
04 May - 10 May	2,125
11 May - 17 May	2,155
18 May - 24 May	1,921
25 May - 31 May	1,377
01 Jun - 07 Jun	1,568
08 Jun - 14 Jun	1,389
15 Jun - 21 Jun	1,090
22 Jun - 28 Jun	980
29 Jun - 05 Jul	899
06 Jul - 12 Jul	794
13 Jul - 19 Jul	892
20 Jul - 26 Jul	656
27 Jul - 02 Aug	412
03 Aug - 09 Aug	1,145
10 Aug - 16 Aug	981
17 Aug - 23 Aug	1,289
24 Aug - 30 Aug	1,766
31 Aug - 06 Sep	3,053
07 Sep - 13 Sep	3,710
14 Sep - 20 Sep	2,723
21 Sep - 27 Sep	2,639
Total	125,959

*Refers to the number of calls and not people calling, as a person may call more than once.

Information on (ii) the number of calls to the 119 number to book a COVID-19 test is not available.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether his Department submitted any written questions or comments to the joint biosecurity centre in relation to COVID-19 travel regulations.

(AQW 7313/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data is provided by the Joint Biosecurity Centre and Public Health England for the whole of the UK and all 4 regions have this same data. Local factors also come into play when it comes to decision making.

I also regularly attend meetings with Ministerial counterparts from across the UK in which the Joint Biosecurity Centre provide detailed updates in relation to Covid-19 travel regulations.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the timeline of the Protect Life 2 procurement process.
(AQW 7334/17-22)

Mr Swann: Procurement of services under Protect Life 2, for which Public Health Agency (PHA) have responsibility, will commence following a process of involvement.

To ensure appropriate input, a process of involvement is expected to commence in December 2020. This initial process will last for a period of 8 weeks following which responses will be collated and made available for comment. Subsequently, a 12 week consultation process is expected to take place from October 2021 following which a procurement stage will commence.

The PHA will advertise all funding opportunities on its website and through eTendersNI.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health when routine surgeries will restart.
(AQW 7347/17-22)

Mr Swann: Surgical activity is being resumed in line with Health and Social Care Trust Rebuilding Plans under the Strategic Framework which I published in June, recognising the severe impact that COVID-19 has had on many of those waiting for appointments and procedures. Due to the ongoing constraints on service capacity, it is necessary to commence with the most clinically urgent cases. Phase 3 Rebuilding Plans covering the period October-December 2020 will be published in early October, and implementation will be overseen by the Rebuilding Services Management Board.

The virus remains a very real threat. It is no easy task to build services back up to pre-existing levels and this must also be balanced against the need to maintain capacity to deal with COVID-19 cases. HSC Trusts will be responsible for operational decisions about how and when normal service will resume within the context of the prevailing COVID-19 conditions.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to improve dementia services.
(AQW 7348/17-22)

Mr Swann: To ensure consistency through implementation of the Improving Dementia Services in NI (2011) strategy, the HSC has provided recurrent funding for the recruitment of two Dementia Service Improvement Leads in each Trust - one in hospital services and one in the community.

They work collaboratively across Northern Ireland to share information and promote best practice and, for most of the time during the HSC response to the pandemic to date, have remained within each Trust's Dementia Service in these roles.

In addition, Integrated Care Partnerships, together with Local Commissioning Groups and Trusts, have been working with the Community and Voluntary sector, people with a dementia and carers, to identify locations / establish prototypes for a Dementia Care Pathway in each Trust area.

Each ICP lead was asked to develop prototypes of the Pathway in each Trust area and they have subsequently drafted initial Investment Proposal Templates. Work has been halted on this while the HSC responds to the pandemic.

The 'Delivering Social Change Dementia Signature Project' which commenced in 2014 was delivered in 2 phases over 6 years and with over £12m of investment, has resulted in considerable developments in the services and care provided to those with a dementia. These services continue to be integrated into the main stream of HSC services.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health to detail progress made on implementation of the Dementia Care Pathway through each of the Integrated Care Partnerships.
(AQW 7367/17-22)

Mr Swann: Integrated Care Partnerships, together with Local Commissioning Groups and Trusts, have been working with the Community and Voluntary sector, people with a dementia and carers, to identify locations / establish prototypes in each Trust area.

Each ICP lead was asked to develop prototypes of the Pathway in each Trust area and they have subsequently drafted initial Investment Proposal Templates.

Work has been halted on this while the HSC responds to the pandemic.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 6110/17-22, to detail the latest position on the administration of the drug Kaftrio.
(AQW 7413/17-22)

Mr Swann: I announced on 30 July 2020 that an agreement with Vertex Pharmaceuticals had been reached. Subsequently I welcomed the news that Kaftrio received its licence for use in Europe on 21 August 2020. I can also advise that the contractual process has been completed and that Kaftrio is now approved for use in the HSC.

A number of the most severely ill patients have already commenced treatment with Kaftrio. However, there are over 500 children and adults who suffer from cystic fibrosis in Northern Ireland. Not all will be clinically suitable for treatment with Kaftrio and not everyone can be treated immediately. Clinical teams are working on the prioritisation of those patients most likely to see the greatest benefit.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health what measures are being put in place to improve access to GP surgeries and encourage face to face appointments.

(AQW 7417/17-22)

Mr Swann: GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. All practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the current pandemic does not negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how best to prioritise patients to provide this core service whilst maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are currently operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients 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. This approach ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. This helps to ensure infection control and social distancing keeping both patients and staff safe.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption.

GPs are still expected to clinically assess for risk of serious illness and refer as clinically appropriate for diagnostic tests and to specialist services, such as an outpatient clinic, as they have always done.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30 July asking that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available and how to access them with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open.

On 7 September, GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that, whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions. GPs want anyone who has a health concern to feel reassured that they will be able to get an appointment and see a GP if necessary. If people have symptoms or an unexplained illness or have any reason to be concerned, they should in the first instance contact their GP who will be able to provide advice.

A letter was also issued to MLAs and other local political representatives providing an update on the current arrangements and asking that they share the key message with constituents that GP practices are open, but working differently.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for the planning and delivery of health and social care services in Northern Ireland. General practice has rapidly changed its working patterns in order to cope with the current national emergency. Some of the measures taken are to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread by providing advice by telephone or video where appropriate. Other decisions are based on the potential impact of COVID-19 on conditions, or on the potential impact of treatments on the risk of COVID-19.

A Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services was published by my Department on 9 June 2020. The Framework recognises the impact of COVID-19 on the Health and Social Care system and that this will be both profound and long lasting, including on how, and the extent to which, services are delivered. It will not be possible to immediately return to business as usual and patient and staff safety must remain at the heart of service delivery.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health what progress has been made on the plans for the new Health and Wellbeing Centre for the centralisation of health provision in Bangor.

(AQW 7420/17-22)

Mr Swann: Owing to the impact of Covid-19, the development of an Outline Business Case for this project has been delayed. The Trust however remains committed to working with the Health and Social Care Board and my Department to progress this project as soon as possible, to deliver a new primary and community care infrastructure for the Ards and North Down population.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health what efforts have been made to ensure local personal protective equipment (PPE) suppliers are considered for the future supply of PPE to his Department.

(AQW 7421/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to my response to AQW 6717/17-22.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health to detail the average waiting times for each Emergency Department in Northern Ireland, for each month since 1 January 2020.

(AQW 7429/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the median waiting times at each Emergency Department by month from January 2020 is detailed in the attached table.

Median Waiting Times at each Emergency Department, by Month (HH:MM)

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep
Mater	3:38	3:28	3:05	2:41	2:55	2:59	2:52	3:16	3:29
RVH	4:14	4:28	3:46	2:46	3:55	3:53	4:18	4:19	4:21
Eye	2:27	2:41	2:04	1:29	1:35	1:59	1:57	2:11	2:18
RBHSC	2:21	2:24	2:06	1:29	1:32	1:33	1:29	1:43	2:17
Antrim Area	3:03	3:27	3:02	2:47	2:42	2:46	3:01	3:30	3:22
Causeway	2:38	2:40	2:31	2:11	2:11	2:26	2:23	2:38	2:32
Mid-Ulster	0:34	0:33	0:39	0:44	0:45	0:46	0:49	0:39	0:40
Ards MIU	0:49	0:45	0:48	0:35	0:35	0:38	0:45	0:41	0:40
Bangor MIU*	0:39	0:38	0:39	-	-	-	-	-	-
Downe**	1:39	1:33	1:38	-	-	-	-	0:24	0:22
Lagan Valley	2:10	2:40	2:06	1:27	1:42	1:50	1:41	2:21	2:19
Ulster	3:22	3:25	3:22	2:59	2:58	3:00	3:16	3:19	3:10
Craigavon Area	4:31	4:22	7:39	6:08	6:14	6:47	7:02	7:29	6:47
Daisy Hill***	2:54	3:04	2:39	-	-	-	-	-	-
South Tyrone	0:29	0:26	0:24	0:21	0:21	0:22	0:22	0:25	0:29
Altnagelvin Area	3:57	4:12	3:53	3:02	3:19	3:41	3:43	3:53	3:32
South West Acute	4:22	3:52	3:24	2:49	2:44	2:51	2:49	2:57	3:18
Omagh	0:54	0:58	0:47	0:46	0:37	0:42	0:57	0:55	1:01

* Bangor temporarily closed 12th March 2020.

** Downe temporarily closed between 30th March 2020 and 10 August 2020.

*** Daisy Hill temporarily closed on 28 March 2020.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health for an update on the reform of stroke services.

(AQW 7449/17-22)

Mr Swann: My officials have completed the analysis of the consultation responses received. I have asked for some further analysis to be undertaken regarding the staffing requirements for the hyperacute stroke network proposed in the consultation and this work is currently underway. I intend to consider this analysis alongside the consultation analysis and evidence base for reform in reaching my decision and will update the House accordingly.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health (i) whether a Serious Adverse Incident review has been initiated into Antrim Area Hospital relating to COVID-19 cases; and (ii) if so, what progress has been made with the review.

(AQW 7450/17-22)

Mr Swann: A Level 3 Serious Adverse Incident (SAI) investigation in relation to two COVID-19 cases at Antrim Area Hospital will be initiated once an independent Chair and panel members are in place. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) is actively seeking an external Chair and awaits agreement on the other potential panel members which were proposed to the family members on 24 September 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how long it takes for contact tracers to contact people who need to self-isolate, having been in contact with people who have tested positive for COVID-19.

(AQW 7456/17-22)

Mr Swann: The average time from the result being received in the Contract Tracing Service from the Central Test Registry until a call is successfully closed (i.e. all the case's close contacts have been contacted) in the 7 day period until 21 September 2020 was 2.15 days.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health when GP practices in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust intend to issue letters to patients aged 65 years and over, and to those with an underlying medical condition, to invite them to come for a flu vaccine.

(AQW 7507/17-22)

Mr Swann: Each year GP practices provide the flu vaccination to their eligible registered patients. Deliveries of the flu vaccine to GP practices started mid-September, and all practices who placed initial orders for vaccines are expected to have either received them by now or will do shortly.

Over the next few weeks practices will be contacting patients who are eligible for flu vaccination to advise them how to get their vaccination. This may be by postal letter but some practices may use other means of communication such as a telephone call or text message.

Practices aim to provide most of their flu vaccination programme during October, November and December.

The GP led element of the public seasonal flu vaccination programme will need to be delivered slightly differently this year due to the Covid-19 related requirements of social distancing and enhanced infection control.

Given the importance of this year's flu vaccine, along with the significant extended lists of those groups who are eligible for it, GPs are making plans to support the implementation of the vaccination programme. This may include hiring larger venues or arranging additional flu vaccination sessions.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health whether priority for the flu vaccine will be given to people with an underlying medical condition who were in receipt of a shielding letter during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 7508/17-22)

Mr Swann: Currently, everyone aged 65 and over and those aged under 65 years of age in clinical "at risk" groups are eligible to receive the flu vaccine free of charge.

The clinical risk groups are set out in full at Annex 3 of the Chief Medical Officer letter HSS (MD) 66/2020 which is available on the Department of Health website at: (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/HSSMD-66-2020.pdf>).

Additional vaccine has been secured for the 2020/21 seasonal flu vaccination programme which will allow for household contacts of those who received shielding letters during the Covid-19 pandemic to request vaccination via their GP.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health how he is seeking to mitigate challenges to patients requiring vitamin B12 injections, in light of restrictions on face-to-face GP and hospital appointments.

(AQW 7531/17-22)

Mr Swann: GP surgeries have remained open throughout the pandemic and, although operating a telephone first triage model, are continuing to provide necessary face to face care.

Patients on regular vitamin B12 injections may have experienced a delay from their normal schedule due to Covid-19. Others have been offered alternative treatment which the best practice guidance from the British Society for Haematology allows for in some cases.

Guidance produced by the British Society for Haematology on vitamin B12 replacement during the Covid-19 pandemic can be viewed at: <https://b-s-h.org.uk/media/18275/bsh-guidance-b12-replacement-covid-1901052020finalv.pdf>

Any patient who is on regular vitamin B12 injections and who has recently experienced a delay in receiving their injection is advised to contact their GP practice directly to discuss when they can receive their injection or the alternatives that are most appropriate to their individual circumstances.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the average waiting time for (i) adult mental health services; (ii) child and adolescent mental health services; and (iii) addiction services.

(AQW 7580/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i) Please find information detailed below.

Table 1. Number of active waits for adult mental health services, by waiting time-bands, as at 31 August 2020.

	0-3 weeks	3-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	Over 9 weeks
Active waits for adult mental health services	1,231	780	378	925

Source: Health and Social Care Board

(ii) Please find information detailed below.

Table 2. Number of active waits for child and adolescent mental health services, by waiting time-bands, as at 31 August 2020.

	0-3 weeks	3-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	Over 9 weeks
Active waits for child and adolescent mental health services	294	257	138	454

Source: Health and Social Care Board

(iii) Addiction services are a subset of adult mental health services. Figures are shown for adult mental health services in part (i). The Opiate Substitution Therapy service is an addiction service for which waiting times are counted separately. Please find information on this service detailed below.

Table 3. Number of active waits for opiate substitution therapy services, by waiting time-bands, as at 31 August 2020.

	0-3 weeks	3-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	Over 9 weeks
Active waits for opiate substitution therapy services	37	19	17	74

Source: Health and Social Care Board

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health to detail the average waiting time from referral to beginning treatment for cancer patients.

(AQW 7592/17-22)

Mr Swann: In the most recent quarter (April-June 2020), the average waiting time from referral to beginning treatment for cancer patients was 72 days.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health whether he will provide updated guidance for self-help support groups who support people with addictions and mental health illnesses to allow the groups to meet face-to-face in a socially distanced capacity.

(AQW 7601/17-22)

Mr Swann: In general mental health services have continued during COVID-19. Everyone that requires mental health services should have been provided with services.

Due to the risks associated with COVID-19 much counselling moved from face to face meetings, to using technology, such as phone calls and video conferencing.

If face to face counselling is necessary, each provider needs to make their own risk assessment based on premises, nature of business and clientele. Guidance on practices during COVID-19 is available from the UK Government, Labour Relations Agency, NI Direct, my Department, and the Public Health Agency websites.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when scientific advice stated that COVID-19 testing in airports is worthwhile.

(AQW 7624/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can advise you that testing for travellers is under active consideration and work is ongoing to develop a scientifically robust methodology which is deliverable, and ensures the risk of transmission of Covid-19 by international travellers is effectively managed.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health whether new guidance will be issued for people who had previously been given a shielding letter, in light of the new COVID-19 restrictions imposed from 22 September 2020.

(AQW 7631/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that this continues to be a difficult time for many people in our community, including those who may have an underlying condition which means they are more clinically vulnerable to the impact of Covid-19.

New health protection regulations came into force across Northern Ireland from 22 September 2020. The overriding aim of these restrictions is to keep household-to-household contact as low as possible to help reduce the spread of Covid-19.

The need for further specific advice for those who were previously shielding is being kept under continuous review. However, at this point in time, there is no change to the decision to pause shielding which came into effect from 1st August 2020.

I believe that it is important that we seek to achieve as balanced an approach as possible. There is always a degree of risk in contacts with the outside world but remaining indoors indefinitely is also detrimental to physical and mental health.

Whilst shielding has not been reactivated, I would encourage clinically vulnerable and older people to be particularly careful in following the advice on limiting household contacts, social distancing, hand washing and wearing a face covering. In addition, it is vital that everyone in our community plays their part in keeping themselves and others safe by following the public health advice and adhering to the new regulations.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health what consideration he is giving to the balance between public health regarding the spread of COVID-19 and the mental health implications of further restrictions.

(AQW 7637/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am fully aware of the potential impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of the people of Northern Ireland. Since the beginning of the pandemic I have been mindful that the measures that we have needed to impose to control the spread of the virus have been mitigated as much as possible in order to protect from the effect of the restrictions on people's daily lives. I have also clearly indicated, along with my Executive colleagues, that mental health is a priority, and that the restrictions will not be kept in place for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

A Mental Health and Resilience Strategic Working Group has been established to coordinate, support and drive the short, medium and longer term response to the psychological impact of the pandemic. A Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Surge Cell is in place with partners from statutory and non statutory sectors. Four further workstreams are also operational to consider implications for children and young people, population and communities, workforce, bereavement and the overall impact of the pandemic on the Mental Health of Northern Ireland population.

The Covid 19 Mental Health response plan focusses on seven strategic themes that have been identified to respond to the impact of the pandemic on the population in Northern Ireland. The overarching outcome of the plan is to increase the psychological wellbeing and good mental health for the population as a whole.

It is expected that the pressures on mental health services post-COVID-19 will continue to increase, potentially significantly. This will mean that service recovery and realignment will be key going forward.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to ensure that (i) trans men; and (ii) non-binary people with a cervix have equal access to cervical screening.

(AQW 7638/17-22)

Mr Swann: Invitations to the cervical screening programme are based on the gender recorded on the person's GP record.

Trans men and non-binary people assigned female at birth who are registered with a GP as female are invited for cervical screening unless they no longer have a cervix and have been ceased on clinical grounds. Trans men and non-binary people assigned female at birth who are registered with a GP as male are not routinely invited for cervical screening but can request screening through their GP practice.

PHA screening programme staff met with the Director of Transgender NI in late 2019 and are currently working with the transgender support group to develop information materials for transgender service users.

The Cervical Screening Programme recommenced on 29 June 2020 with appointment invitations being issued for those for whom colposcopy or laboratories had recommended a repeat smear test. Routine 3 or 5 yearly recall invitations recommenced from mid-August. GPs have been asked to ensure that those with cancelled appointments and those who were non-responders in the early days of the pandemic are also followed up.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he will commit to disclosing all the documents relevant to the contaminated blood scandal, to the Inquiry and to victims, including waiving Legal Professional Privilege.

(AQW 7645/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are valid arguments both for and against a Legal Professional Privilege (LPP) waiver in relation to the Infected Blood Inquiry. Whilst I fully intend to be as open and transparent as possible in the spirit of cooperation with the Inquiry, the fundamental principle of LPP is deeply embedded in the law, normally with very few exceptions, and to waive it would be a significant departure from established policy and practice. To provide a blanket waiver of LPP for the Infected Blood Inquiry could potentially set a precedent for future public inquiries which in turn could have an adverse impact on the wider conduct of departmental business.

I have taken legal advice on this matter and considered the potential consequences of either course of action and on balance I have made the decision that a case by case approach will be taken in deciding whether to disclose records subject to LPP. My starting position is a willingness to assist the Inquiry and a readiness to waive LPP in respect of individual documents where applicable. I am preserving the right to assert LPP, but am committed to giving the Inquiry the maximum degree of

cooperation possible. In practice, this means considering documents that might attract LPP on a case by case basis; however, there is no question of an inflexible or blanket assertion of LPP which would impede the Inquiry.

My Department has already responded to several Rule 9 requests from the Inquiry, including requests for records held by the Department deemed to be potentially relevant to the Inquiry and provision of written statements from senior officials on records retention policy, the provision of psychological support and most recently, establishment of the NI Infected Blood Payment Scheme.

In addition to records already provided to the Inquiry, my Department has been working closely with the Public Records Office in Northern Ireland (PRONI) and the Departmental Solicitors Office (DSO) to proactively identify and disclose any additional records which may be of interest to the Inquiry. Detailed review of the content of these files has required additional resource and demonstrates my Department's openness and transparency and willingness to support the Inquiry. My Department will continue to provide full support to the Inquiry, responding to all requests for the provision of documents and written statements, throughout the Inquiry process.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has addressed the issues with data sharing and contact tracing barriers across the island of Ireland.

(AQW 7647/17-22)

Mr Swann: An established process is in place for sharing the necessary details between Northern Ireland (NI) and Republic of Ireland (RoI) in respect of people who may have been in contact with someone who has tested positive on the other side of the border as follows:

Where the confirmed case provides details of one or more contacts who live in the RoI, the details of the contacts are sent to the appropriate local Health Protection Team in RoI (the NI PHA Health Protection Team holds the contact details for the Health Protection Teams in RoI). The information will be handed over via a telephone call from one registered Health Professional to another. In the event that a large number of contacts have been identified a document containing the information will be sent via an encrypted email.

Where the confirmed case resides in RoI with contacts identified as residing in Northern Ireland, the process works in reverse, with contact details provided to the PHA Contact Tracing Service to follow up in NI.

The Chief Medical Officers and their Teams in NI and RoI meet regularly (generally weekly) to discuss the pandemic and the actions in progress to mitigate and manage the risks associated with disease activity in their respective jurisdictions. The two CMOs have recently issued correspondence to their respective Public Health Services (on 30 September) to highlight the need for regular, formalised close cooperation and communication on COVID-19 mitigation between respective Public Health Teams in NI and RoI, under the existing Memorandum of Understanding.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health how many patients are currently on the (i) urgent; and (ii) emergency referral waiting list for treatment.

(AQW 7711/17-22)

Mr Swann: There were 63,899 patients waiting for an urgent first outpatient appointment and 37,712 patients waiting for an urgent inpatient or day case appointment at 31st August 2020. Patients are classified as requiring routine or urgent appointments, therefore a further breakdown to 'emergency' is not possible.

These data are considered to be management information and as such are provisional and subject to change. The data presented excludes a small number of medical specialties which are not captured on the Patient Administration System (PAS), however these specialties are included in our routine National Statistics Quarterly Waiting Times Publications. Further information on these management information data, as well as future monthly updates, will be available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/interim-waiting-times-reports>.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health for an update on the capital planning review exercise on the regional review of capital priorities; and whether any budget has been made available for new disability day centres in Ards and North Down.

(AQW 7756/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Drafting of a 10-year capital plan was nearly complete in early 2020 but owing to the impact of Covid-19, the need to take account of the rebuilding of healthcare services, and budgetary planning exercises, my officials are currently updating the future capital plan.
- (ii) The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has submitted a proposal in response to the capital planning review exercise for the development of day opportunities for people with a learning disability in North Down and Ards. I will consider this proposal alongside other capital investment priorities. However the ability to take forward new capital projects will only be possible if significant additional capital resources are made available.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on stroke services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 7803/17-22)

Mr Swann: My officials have completed the analysis of the consultation responses received to the Reshaping Stroke Care consultation. It is clear that respondents from the Western Trust area have a number of concerns about any changes to stroke services at the South West Acute Hospital. I can assure you that I will give careful consideration to those concerns going forward.

In addition to the consultation analysis, I have asked my Officials to conduct some further analysis regarding the staffing requirements for the hyperacute stroke network proposed in the consultation and this work is currently underway. I intend to consider this analysis alongside the consultation analysis and evidence base for reform in reaching my decision and will update the House accordingly.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health, in relation to the daily statistics on hospital inpatients, whether an inpatient is classified as someone who spends at least one night in hospital.
(AQW 7831/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is assumed this question refers to the daily statistics released by the Department on the COVID-19 Dashboard. Information on inpatients refers to patients in a hospital bed with confirmed COVID-19 at midnight.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health, given the rapid increase in positive COVID-19 cases in the North West of Northern Ireland, to detail how he will further mitigate any associated risk to public health from cross-border travel at this time.
(AQW 7841/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Chief Medical Officers from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland recently advised against all but necessary travel across the NI-Downpatrick border. Additionally, a series of localised restrictions were agreed by the Executive on the 1 October in the Derry City and Strabane District Council areas. These can be viewed on The Executive Office website. In further guidance, residents in these areas have also been advised to avoid all unnecessary travel and it is advised that people only travel to the area where it is absolutely necessary.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, given the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority enforcement action in Greenhaw Lodge Care Centre, whether there is sufficient capacity for care home beds in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 7866/17-22)

Mr Swann: An assessment of current capacity of care home beds across the Western Trust and regionally has been undertaken as part of an options appraisal of locations that up to 41 residents of Greenhaw Lodge Care Centre, could be transferred to.

The Trust is working with the HSCB and other agencies, including Larchwood Care Ltd. under the auspices of the Regional Care Homes Business Continuity Plan to establish a safe and effective process for this, in response to the RQIA inspection findings and subsequent court order.

Families of all residents are being kept informed and will be engaged in this process and it is anticipated that clarity on next steps will be determined this week.

I will keep members updated developments occur.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he will seek a review of current UK regulations on accessibility of Pirfenidone and Nintedanib medication for people diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis.
(AQO 810/17-22)

Mr Swann: The regulatory bodies for medicines in the UK are: the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA); and, the European Medicines Authority (EMA). These organisations license medicines for use in the UK. Both pirfenidone and nintedanib are licensed for use in the UK.

Licenses for drugs are therefore defined as UK regulations.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence - or NICE, as it is most commonly known – is an English Non Departmental Public Body whose guidance on drugs must, by law in England, be implemented within three months of publication. Therefore when NICE recommends the use of a drug in England, NHS England must make it available within three months.

NICE guidelines are not UK regulations.

My Department has a formal link with NICE under which NICE technology appraisals are reviewed locally for their applicability here, and where found to be applicable, they are endorsed for implementation within Health and Social Care.

Whilst there is a process to check the guidance for legal and policy applicability in Northern Ireland, there is no reassessment of the clinical or cost evidence used by NICE in coming to its decisions and forming its advice.

Both pirfenidone and nintedanib have been recommended by NICE and are available for treating patients in Northern Ireland who meet the NICE eligibility criteria for treatment.

However, I can also advise that NICE has commenced a routine technical appraisal review on both pirfenidone and nintedanib, which is expected to conclude in 2021. The aim of a technical appraisal is to consider whether there is any significant new evidence likely to impact on the current recommendations and so determine whether the guidance should be updated.

NICE advice does not override or replace the individual responsibility of health professionals to make appropriate decisions in the circumstances of their individual patients, in consultation with the patient and/or guardian or carer. This would, for example, include situations where individual patients have other conditions or complications that need to be taken into account in determining whether the NICE guidance is fully appropriate in their case.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health, in relation to the influenza season and the reduction of capacity in GP services, how he will ensure that people can access face-to-face GP appointments.
(AQO 811/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that many people have concerns about the Autumn and Winter period and particularly the coincidence of influenza season with the current Covid-19 pandemic.

The GP led element of the public seasonal flu vaccination programme will need to be delivered slightly differently this year due to the Covid-19 related requirements of social distancing and enhanced infection control. My officials are liaising with GP representatives to plan appropriately given these circumstances.

Alongside securing safe delivery of the flu vaccination programme, GP practices will continue to provide face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. All practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment to allow them to do so safely. Information from the Health and Social Care Board indicates that there has been an increase in GP face to face contacts and I am pleased to see that this is the case.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the current pandemic does not in any way negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how best to prioritise patients to provide this core service whilst maintaining patient safety.

GP practices will continue to operate a telephone first triage system over the Autumn period. This 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.

This ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. This helps to ensure social distancing and infection control keeping both patients and staff safe and allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres.

I want to reiterate that whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions.

On 7th September, GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions.

Patients should be reassured that if they have a health concern, they will be able to get an appointment to see a GP if necessary.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health when the triple combination treatment Kaftrio will be available for eligible cystic fibrosis patients.
(AQO 812/17-22)

Mr Swann: Mr Speaker, I am very happy to provide an update on plans to provide eligible patients in Northern Ireland with access to the cystic fibrosis drug Kaftrio.

The contract with Vertex Pharmaceuticals was signed on 02 October – last Friday. This means that, potentially, all cystic fibrosis patients in Northern Ireland who are clinically suitable for treatment may have access to one of the novel therapies produced by Vertex. This includes Kaftrio as well as Kalydeco, Orkambi and Symkevi.

I can also advise that a number (20) of the most severely ill patients had already commenced treatment with Kaftrio, which was provided through a managed access programme agreed with Vertex.

I know that the doctors, nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, dieticians – all the people involved in the care of cystic fibrosis patients – want to see patients being able to start their treatment as soon as possible. I share that wish and it is my hope that this new agreement will see cystic fibrosis patients who have for so long been without effective treatments, begin to lead longer, healthier lives.

There are more than 500 children and adults who suffer from cystic fibrosis in Northern Ireland. Not all will be suitable for treatment with these drugs and not everyone can be seen immediately, it is right that the most ill patients should be seen first and those decisions will be a clinical matter. I have asked that Trusts contact cystic fibrosis patients as soon as possible and let them know what steps are being put in place to assess and prioritise patients, and so avoid unnecessary worry.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how he will address outpatient waiting lists.

(AQO 813/17-22)

Mr Swann: I fully appreciate that every patient should be able to avail of the best treatment that the health service can provide, and in a timely manner. It is regrettable that any patient has to wait longer than is clinically appropriate for assessment or treatment and I fully understand the distress and anxiety that long waiting times cause, particularly when patients are suffering pain and discomfort, and I can assure you that reducing waiting times for elective care remains a key priority for the health service in Northern Ireland.

COVID-19 has placed unprecedented challenges on our health services and the need to redirect HSC resources to respond to the pandemic has had an adverse impact on waiting times for elective care, which prior to the pandemic were already unacceptable.

The focus now is on the rebuilding of services and I have been clear that we need to increase health service activity as quickly as possible across all programmes of care, including elective, within the prevailing COVID-19 context. At the same time we need to plan for potential future surges of the virus to ensure we remain prepared.

As part of the process to rebuild HSC services in the wake of the first wave of COVID-19, I published the Rebuilding HSC Services Strategic Framework in June. The Framework outlines the HSC's plans to rebuild health and social care and sets out the approach to resetting elective activity in an environment which is safe for both staff and patients. Northern Ireland's six HSC Trusts have published plans setting out the work being done in their areas.

It is important to emphasise that the impact of COVID-19 on elective care services will be profound and long-lasting. Services will not be able to resume as normal for some time due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19 including social distancing and the use of PPE. These requirements will inevitably have an adverse impact on waiting times for elective care for some time to come.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Health what mental health advice and support is available for those who are required to self-isolate due to COVID-19.

(AQO 814/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is accepted that the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular lockdown and other restrictions, will have a negative impact on our population's mental wellbeing.

I understand that those who are asked to self isolate may feel lonely, anxious, worried or stressed, and frustrated by the disruption to their daily lives.

At the start of the pandemic I put arrangements in place to mitigate and address this impact. For example, the Public Health Agency developed specific public health messaging to support people to look after their mental wellbeing while staying at home.

A wide range of mental health support and advice is available on the mindingyourhead.info website and on the Covid Wellbeing NI hub, including an online apps library to provide the public with access to safe and approved apps to support self-help at home. Furthermore, online Stress Control classes are available for the public to access free of charge until March 2021.

Mental health services also continue to operate, albeit using different formats in some instances. Individuals who require mental health support should contact their GP in the first instance, or, if they are in distress or despair, call Lifeline, where trained counsellors are available to provide support. If the situation is an emergency they should phone 999.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Health what additional capacity is being made available to treat the critically ill with COVID-19 in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQO 815/17-22)

Mr Swann: This is obviously a very challenging time particularly in the Derry and Strabane area, where increased community transmission of the virus is now being seen in a higher number of hospital admissions.

The Western Trust has a surge plan in place for critical care. In the event of critically ill patients testing positive for COVID-19, an additional 8 beds will be available (total 18) using first stage recovery and theatres within the Altnagelvin Area Hospital site.

The southern sector will increase by 4 beds to a total of 10 beds in the event of COVID-19 positive critically ill patients on the South West Acute Hospital site.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of how withdrawal from the European Union, particularly in the context of a no-deal withdrawal, will impact on our ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQO 816/17-22)

Mr Swann: The UK officially left the European Union on 31 January 2020 after the signing of the European Union Withdrawal Agreement (EUWA) which established the transition period. The Withdrawal Agreement also cemented certain citizens' rights

and instituted the Northern Ireland protocol which will continue after the end of transition whether or not the UK comes to a longer term agreement with the EU.

Maintaining access to medicines and medical supplies is an essential part of the Covid-19 response. In relation to EU transition planning, the responsibility for the continuity of supply of medicines in the UK rests with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). A multi-layered approach to national contingencies has been established to mitigate the risk of reaching the end of transition without an agreement which includes increasing UK stockholdings of medicines and medical products. In addition to national contingencies, the Department is working with DHSC to ensure that other mitigations are taken, where needed, in the context of the NI protocol. Stockpiles of medicines to support treatment of COVID-19 patients are also being stockpiled by the DHSC on behalf of Northern Ireland to alleviate any additional pressures during the pandemic.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what measures he is taking to prevent further increases in COVID-19 cases in care homes.

(AQO 817/17-22)

Mr Swann: From the start of this pandemic, protecting residents and those working in our care homes has been a key priority of mine and this will continue to be the case as we respond to the pandemic through the Winter;

- One of the key measures in preventing further increases of COVID-19, is the continuation of the rolling programme of testing for care home residents and staff supported by the PHA and Trusts;;
- This programme will continue to play a significant role in helping to minimise the risk of COVID-19 through early identification of single cases and potential clusters of cases, and will enable immediate steps to be taken to prevent spread of infection, thereby ensuring the continued safety of our residents and staff'.
- The Nursing and Residential Guidance and in particular visiting guidance are being continually updated. The latest revision to the visiting Guidance has been drawn up to protect patients, residents and staff from Covid-19, while recognising the importance of human contact to health and well-being.
- I have also introduced financial support measures aimed at safeguarding the financial resilience of care home providers by guaranteeing a level of income since mid-March. This has since been supplemented with a £6.5m support package announced on the 27th April to address the additional costs they have faced.
- A further announcement was made in June 2020 with a package of additional investment of £11.7m in care homes to help enhance infection and prevention control and care in homes. I continue to look at additional measure that will support the Sector;
- There has been ongoing provision of PPE to care home providers with some 42 million items of PPE provided to independent sector care homes up to the week ending 12th September. These have a value of at least £14m;
- Staffing - Trusts have also stepped in to provide over 26000hours of free staffing time in homes while support and expertise continues to be available from the RQIA and in the event of an outbreak from the Public Health Agency;
- As I outlined earlier, supporting the work of the work of the care home sector has been an absolute priority for the HSC from the start of the pandemic;
- I and Senior Departmental officials continue to maintain regular contact with the Sector in consideration of the challenges it continues to face in providing care to some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on work to improve congestion on the Omagh bypass.
(AQW 7210/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I acknowledge that traffic congestion occurs on the road network in Omagh, especially during peak periods, and this is largely a consequence of both local and strategic traffic having to compete for the same road space in and around the town. In this regard I recognise that the planned A5 Western Transport Corridor (A5WTC) dual carriageway would greatly improve traffic progression in Omagh and as you are aware I am fully committed to the delivery of this important project. Following the Public Inquiry of earlier this year, my Department received an Interim Report from the Inspector on 2 September 2020. Officials are considering the issues raised and recommendations made in the report in addition to taking legal advice before I decide on the next steps for this very important scheme.

My officials continue to seek to identify appropriate measures to improve traffic progression on the town's road network to enhance capacity. Traffic surveys have been undertaken at the signalised junction on the Omagh bypass at the Great Northern Road/ James Street junction to seek to determine if further improvements can be made however this information is now being updated due to the reduction in traffic volumes associated with Covid 19 restrictions.

Officials are also seeking to introduce further walking and cycling measures to provide and promote active travel within the town and are continuing to work collaboratively with other stakeholders, to maximise opportunities to do so.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of the current rights of appeal in the Planning system in Northern Ireland; and (ii) whether she would support the introduction of equal rights of appeal.

(AQW 7237/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current rights of appeal within the Northern Ireland planning system are appropriate. The legislative and structural changes to the planning system which came into effect with the new two-tier system in 2015 are designed to deliver an inclusive, front-loaded system with stronger third party engagement and local democratic accountability. In this context there are currently no plans to introduce a third party right of appeal which risks reducing certainty and the effectiveness and efficiency of the planning system at this critical time.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure for the religious makeup of engineering apprentices employed by Translink, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7249/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below provides religious makeup of engineering apprentices employed by Translink, in each of the last five years.

Translink Engineering Apprentices 2016- 2020

	Protestant	Percentage	Roman Catholic	Percentage	Grand Total
01.01.20	22	59.46%	15	40.54%	37
01.01.19	14	46.67%	16	53.33%	30
01.01.18	11	61.11%	7	38.89%	18
01.01.17	9	56.25%	7	43.75%	16
01.01.16	17	56.67%	13	43.33%	30

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in order to ensure the road network is kept running smoothly over the winter period, to detail her Department's plans for winter.

(AQW 7254/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Prior to the start of each winter season my Department carries out a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter.

This planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, all winter service equipment is in satisfactory working order, there are adequate supplies of salt and arrangements are made to supplement salt stocks during the winter period if necessary.

Whilst the Department targets the limited resources available for gritting towards the busier through routes, on many other routes that do not qualify for inclusion in the gritting schedule, salt bins or grit piles are provided for use by the public on a self-help basis.

Subject to the availability of funding, a full winter service will operate from 19th October 2020 until 5th April 2021 with approximately 300 staff and 130 gritters available and ready to salt main roads in order to help drivers across Northern Ireland deal with the wintry conditions. I very much welcome the recent £5m allocation from the Covid bids exercise which will make a much needed contribution to the cost of an average winter of £7m. My Department has also bid for a further £2m in October Monitoring on the basis that this winter could require more funding than normal.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure what her Department is doing to reduce how long it takes to process major planning applications.

(AQW 7268/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is the responsibility of each planning authority (which would include my Department for regionally significant proposals) to monitor their major applications to ensure they are processed in a timely manner.

However, in order to seek to improve the performance in the processing of major applications, at a strategic level, my Department commissioned a report into the role of statutory consultees in the planning process which was completed towards the end of last year. This report contained a number of recommendations with the aim of improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the planning process, particularly with regard to major and "economically sensitive" planning applications.

My Department is working with statutory consultees and councils to consider and take forward these recommendations, including through a Planning Forum of senior managers and an associated sub-group of staff at the operational level.

My Department regularly meets council heads of planning to discuss matters of policy and practice which may be affecting performance in various areas of the planning system.

In addition, my Department is carrying out a review of the Planning Act (NI) 2011, which may identify potential areas for legislative change to help to improve processing times for planning applications.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what discussions her Department has had with Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council in respect to the historical site at Knock Iveagh; (ii) what action her Department will take if the council do not resolve the issue; and (iii) whether she will ensure that no cost will be incurred by council constituents following her Department's decision on Knock Iveagh.

(AQW 7277/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Development at the Knock Iveagh site remains under consideration by Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council as local planning authority for the area. Whilst these processes are ongoing, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further as to do so could either influence or prejudice the Council's deliberations.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in order to facilitate social distancing and provide space for residents and local businesses, what support her Department can give to residents who wish to pilot pedestrianised areas within their communities.

(AQW 7307/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am keen to deliver green infrastructure to create active travel opportunities for local communities as part of our Green Recovery for Northern Ireland and part of this is through creating quiet streets for people.

In order to do this, my Department is working with Councils and community bodies. While my Department will consider requests for trial pedestrianised areas on a case by case basis it is important that communities can demonstrate that there is local support for their proposals and that the interests of wider stakeholders are being taken account of. Residents and local businesses can also engage with their local Council who are developing proposals for consideration by my Department.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure to list the Competent Authorities in Northern Ireland responsible for undertaking Habitats Regulations Assessments, as required under Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive.

(AQW 7308/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 do not set out a definitive list of competent authorities but rather defines a competent authority in the context of a body's public duties in relation to authorising (consenting, permitting, licencing etc.) a plan or project that would be likely to have a significant effect on a designated European site.

In terms of the planning system this will normally be the authority determining an application for planning permission. In the majority of cases this will be a district council in its role as local planning authority as well as the Department for regionally significant or called-in applications; and the Planning Appeals Commission for any permission granted on foot of an appeal.

My Department will also be the competent authority in relation to Roads, Rivers and Drainage developments which attract the requirements of the Habitats Regulations.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the agreement as part of the selling process for the stocking of fish for Portavoe Reservoir.

(AQW 7335/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised me that the sale of Portavoe Reservoir was subject to a Service Level Agreement (SLA) between NI Water and DAERA Inland Fisheries. The SLA transferred the fishing rights on the reservoir to DAERA Inland Fisheries and enables DAERA to stock the reservoir with fish.

NI Water has also advised that the sale transfer to the respective purchasers contains provisions requiring the purchasers to take all reasonable steps to take over NI Water's obligations and benefits under the SLA (referred to as the Fisheries Agreement) as they relate to the Property. The provisions of sale transfer also require the purchasers to observe and comply with the terms and conditions of the Fisheries Agreement from completion, and indemnifies NI Water, and keeps it indemnified, against all liabilities, costs, damages or losses suffered or incurred arising out of, or in connection with, any breach of the Agreement by the purchasers, their agents or contractors after completion, or any failure of the purchasers to take over the Agreement in accordance with the sale transfer, except where the breach or failure arises from an act or omission of NI Water or its agents or contractors.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether NI Water explored ownership of the access road into Portavoe Reservoir before selling it.

(AQW 7336/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised me that ownership of the access road was explored and it was established that NI Water did not own it. NI Water has also advised that the sale of the reservoir did not affect any existing rights of third parties in respect of the access road.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why, as part of the sale agreement by NI Water for Portavoe Reservoir, has the right of access by angling permit holders been denied when this was agreed as part of the sale.

(AQW 7337/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised me that the sale of Portavoe Reservoir was subject to the continuation of a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with DAERA Inland Fisheries. NI Water's duties under the SLA transferred to the purchasers under the terms of the sale agreement, and it is therefore unable to comment on any issues in respect of the right of access to the reservoir.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the outcome of the evaluation of the Homeowners Flood Protection Grant Scheme.

(AQW 7351/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme aims to encourage the owners of homes, located in areas of flood risk, to make modifications to their properties in order for them to be more resistant to flooding. I am pleased to confirm that the evaluation of the Scheme has demonstrated both a need for, and benefit from, a property level protection grant scheme.

I consider a grant scheme, which helps to deliver individual property level protection, to be an important part of my Department's 'toolkit' to effectively manage flood risk. I have therefore asked for further information on options to ensure this assistance can continue to be offered. The existing scheme remains open to new applications while this work is undertaken.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the more flexible, resilient, catchment-centred approach to flood management of the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' new policy statement, the Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy.

(AQW 7352/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy policy statement, published in July 2020, sets out Defra's long-term ambition of increased resilience to future flood and coastal erosion risk, and reduced risk of harm to people, the environment and the economy. The Policy Statement is only applicable to England, though it mirrors a number of plans, strategies and areas of work being progressed by my officials.

In terms of this work, the sustainable approach to managing flood risk, as set out in the Executive's Sustainable Water - A Long Term Water Strategy, takes a holistic view of the more sustainable use and management of water in and through our environment, striking a balance between supporting economic growth, whilst protecting the environment. The strategy sets out a number of short, medium and long-term actions, and includes a section on flood risk management and drainage.

In addition, work being delivered by my Department continues to ensure that flood risk within the North is being managed sustainably. The delivery of updated draft flood risk management plans, due for publication in December 2020, will assess flood risk on a catchment wide approach and will detail mitigation measures to protect against flooding consequences. The plans will draw upon similar themes to the DEFRA policy statement, as future risk from climate change and utilising the natural landscape to provide multiple benefits beyond simply flooding will be key principles in planning for, and mitigating against, future flood risk.

Through the Living With Water Programme (LWWP), my officials are taking forward an integrated, catchment-based approach to future drainage and wastewater management through the development of a strategic drainage infrastructure plan for the greater Belfast area. Whilst DfI is leading this programme, there are many key stakeholders from across central and local government who are working collaboratively through the LWWP to develop sustainable drainage solutions. The draft plan will indicate that around £1.4bn of investment is needed over the next 12 years to upgrade the drainage and wastewater infrastructure in the greater Belfast area to: protect against flooding; enhance the environment; and allow growth in the economy. Proposed measures will include both blue/green infrastructure (such as river floodplain reconnection works) and conventional hard engineered measures (such as sewerage network improvements).

Finally, my Department has been working with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) on coastal erosion risk management issues. Through the Coastal Forum, whose membership includes DfI, DAERA, the seven councils with a coastline and the National Trust, a draft Coastal Forum work programme has been developed, a key objective of which is to undertake a coastal change assessment of the North's coastline.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to list all unadopted alleyways in the West Belfast constituency.

(AQW 7358/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not hold details of privately owned or unadopted alleyways in West Belfast or anywhere in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of pavements which have been adapted for accessibility, broken down by constituency, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7374/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not keep a record of the number of locations which have been adapted for accessibility so regrettably I am unable to provide the information requested. However, I can assure the Member that my Department gives careful consideration to the accessibility needs of pedestrians during all aspects of our work and in recent years my

Department has invested significant levels of resources to both improving existing facilities and providing new facilities for pedestrians where this can be achieved within our limited budgets.

Dropped kerbs are one of a number of measures that can be used to create a barrier-free pedestrian environment as they facilitate easier access and movement for pedestrians, especially the young, elderly and those with mobility difficulties and disabilities. In order to assist pedestrians with reduced mobility, we provide dropped kerbs along with appropriate tactile paving along strategic routes and in areas with high levels of pedestrian activity. Dropped kerbs and tactile paving are also provided at all crossing points on all new works, including footway resurfacing/reconstruction schemes.

Details of completed schemes and pedestrian measures are reported in the DfI Roads Divisions' Spring and Autumn Council Reports which can be accessed via the following link:-

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/type/corporatereports>

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of requests received by her Department to adapt a pavement with a dropped kerb; and (ii) the number of dropped kerbs installed, broken down by constituency, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7375/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not keep a record of the number of requests for dropped kerbs or the number of dropped kerbs installed. However, I can assure the Member that my Department gives careful consideration to the accessibility needs of pedestrians during all aspects of our work

Dropped kerbs are one of a number of measures that can be used to create a barrier-free pedestrian environment as they facilitate easier access and movement for pedestrians, especially the young, elderly and those with mobility difficulties and disabilities. In order to assist pedestrians with reduced mobility, we provide dropped kerbs along with appropriate tactile paving along strategic routes and in areas with high levels of pedestrian activity. Dropped kerbs and tactile paving are also provided at crossing points on all new works, including footway resurfacing/reconstruction schemes.

Whilst my Department does not hold the information requested, the information set out in the table below, which relates to the Belfast City Council area, may be of interest to the Member:

Council Area	Number of Requests*					Number of Kerbs Installed*				
	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Belfast City	9	7	13	11	22	40	73	34	99	122

*approximate numbers only

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail how she will encourage the uptake of e-Bikes.

(AQW 7389/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Member will be aware, I introduced legislation in the Northern Ireland Assembly on 12th May 2020, which made cycling an e-bike on public roads legal, without the need for registration or licensing. This was a major contribution to encouraging the uptake of e-bikes and, the media has reported a surge in demand for both standard bikes and electric bikes since then.

I want to create safer conditions that will encourage more people to replace their everyday journeys by an active and sustainable method of travel where possible whether walking, cycling or using an e-bike.

The Covid crisis has brought unprecedented challenges and has fundamentally changed the way we live. There is no doubt that it has also created an opportunity for us all to take a closer look at how we travel and consider how we can do things better moving forward.

My Department will continue to encourage and support active travel choices, including all types of cycling, and related initiatives through our public information campaigns and social media messages.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will review the decision not to permit extension of the 30mph speed limit to the boundary of Crawfordsburn village at Ballyrobert Road near Clandeboye Way.

(AQW 7390/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The need for a change in the speed limit on a road is assessed in accordance with the Department's guidelines titled 'Setting Local Speed Limits in Northern Ireland' which can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/setting-local-speed-limits-northern-ireland-rsppg-e051>

A previous assessment carried out in accordance with this policy indicated that a reduction of the existing national speed limit would not be appropriate given the level of development and the nature of the road.

This section of Ballyrobert Road leading towards the A2 Belfast to Bangor dual carriageway is primarily rural in nature with minimal frontage development. It is acknowledged that usage of the existing accesses and the number of direct accesses onto the road has increased. I have therefore asked my officials to carry out a new assessment.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of whether the Northern Ireland Water development at Brompton Road, Bangor, is in line with plans and permissions previously obtained.
(AQW 7391/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised by NI Water that the works currently under construction at the Brompton Road site, as part of a wider £4m programme to replace waste water pumping stations and sewers in the area, are in line with permissions obtained prior to the commencement of the works.

Construction of a tank, taking place above ground level at the Brompton Road site, is currently underway. When its concrete walls are complete, rock will be carefully excavated below and the tank will gradually sink to its final position below ground level.

Once the tank is fully buried, the area will be landscaped. On completion of the works, the only above ground structure at the Brompton Road site will be the control building for the pumping station. I am informed that this has been designed to resemble an old boat house with natural stone cladding to blend in with the natural environment.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in order to reduce its restrictive impact on potential planning applications such as at Fort George or the Glen Development Initiative, Derry, what action she is taking to amend PPS 15 in relation to floodplains.
(AQW 7394/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current planning policy framework provided by revised PPS 15, was formulated in anticipation of the commencement of the Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Where relevant, Revised PPS 15 therefore remains an important and necessary consideration when assessing the individual merits of planning schemes.

It is of critical importance to people, property and the environment that assurances regarding the condition of reservoirs can be provided and that any flood risk is managed and minimised so that development schemes can be implemented safely. I understand that in the case of Creggan Upper and Creggan Lower reservoirs remedial works are required to bring the reservoirs up to the required standard in order to provide sufficient assurances in relation to reservoirs safety. Amending extant regional planning policy in Revised PPS 15 (and the Strategic Planning Policy Statement) cannot deal with the fundamental issues of reservoir safety regulation.

The Reservoirs Act is the primary instrument for regulating controlled reservoirs in the North. A Transfer of Functions Order is being progressed through The Executive Office to transfer responsibility for the Act from DAERA to my Department. Once statutory responsibility is transferred, I will be in a position to consider the necessary secondary legislation required to commence the remaining sections of the Act and the introduction of the management and maintenance regime envisaged by it. The provision of sufficient assurance regarding reservoir safety will be much more straightforward when the Reservoirs Act is substantively commenced and established.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following the tragedy at Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire in August during which a number of people died and were injured, what measures NI Railways is taking to ensure that trainlines in the North, which are located along coastal routes and which could be susceptible to landslides and adverse weather conditions, are being made safe.
(AQW 7398/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Railways takes the safety of its network very seriously. Translink engineers manage and maintain similar infrastructure, not only on coastal routes but across the rail network, by carrying out regular inspections of the earthworks at set intervals. They also carry out safety inspections, both during and after adverse weather events, to ensure that preventative maintenance is undertaken where possible. Additional safety inspections and maintenance is also carried out at almost thirty drainage sites to prevent the blockage of culvert and earthworks drains and this activity is again intensified before and after heavy rainfall events.

I have been closely following the developments of the official Rail Accident and Investigation Branch (RAIB) investigation that is ongoing into the derailment at Carmont near Stonehaven and intend to implement, where applicable, the recommendations made in this report when published to ensure that the risk of such events occurring on NI Railways is mitigated as much as possible.

My thoughts go out to all those who lost their loved ones and to everyone who was affected by this tragedy.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the current ongoing road scheme at Blacks Road with the carriageway reconfiguration of an additional lane onto Old Golf Course Road with provision of a new footbridge over the railway line at Blacks Road, for an update on the current status of the provision of on/off slips to M1 (Western side) at Blacks Road which is listed as a future road scheme.
(AQW 7401/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan 2015 (published in 2004) proposed slip Roads on the western side of the M1 Junction 3 at Blacks Road. Subsequently the project was included in the Departments Investment Delivery Plan for Roads published in April 2008 to cover the 10 year period to 2018. However due to funding priorities for other strategic road schemes this has not been progressed.

I am committed to developing new integrated plans which deliver support for public transport, encourages more walking and cycling, better manages car commuting and promotes sustainable development all in an effort to improve the environment and people's lives. The Blacks Road Slip Roads project will therefore be considered in the context of transport patterns and land use changes planned across the metropolitan area.

My officials are currently preparing for my consideration a new suite of Transport Plans, including a new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) being advanced in conjunction with the Local Development Plans of Belfast City Council and the neighbouring councils. These Transport Plans are still in development but will be subject to full public consultation.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much of Translink's fleet is classed as (i) zero emission; and (ii) low emission, compared to the total fleet number.

(AQW 7409/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- i Currently there are no zero emission vehicles in the Translink fleet. Earlier this year, I announced Translink's procurement of 3 Hydrogen Buses. This will be the first Hydrogen buses on the island. In addition, I have approved £50m capital funding for the purchase of 100 zero emission vehicles by Translink over the next 2 years. These vehicles will include 80 Battery Electric Buses and 20 Hydrogen Fuel Cell Buses. It is anticipated the new buses will go into service in Belfast and Derry in Spring 2022.
- ii Currently, 23.9% of the fleet would be categorised as low emission vehicles. This number is set to increase with further deliveries of minibus, single deck, double deck and coaches are made in 2020/21.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the rural roads fund.

(AQW 7410/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Member is aware I announced an investment of £75m in the structural maintenance of the road network in 2020/2021. Recognising the importance of investment in the roads network to improve connectivity, help communities and tackle regional imbalance, I instructed officials to allocate £12m to a Roads Recovery Fund, £10m of which is to be directed towards rural roads.

Although the COVID 19 pandemic led to some initial delays in the commencement of the 2020-21 Road Recovery work, Divisional teams are finalising their programmes with some work already underway across a number of areas. These improvements are targeting many short lengths of rural roads that are in particularly poor condition and it is estimated that over 500 locations on the rural road network will benefit from these improvements.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will implement further traffic calming measures in the Middletown area.

(AQW 7411/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the importance of safer pedestrian links and road safety measures by means of traffic calming measures, signs and road markings and I am committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland.

My Department has implemented a number of traffic calming measures on the A3 through Middletown, including the provision of 40mph speed limits in advance of the 30mph speed limits, aimed at helping to lower the speed of vehicles entering the village. These speed limits are reinforced by the presence of red textured road surfacing and roundels along with a gateway sign requesting that drivers drive carefully through the village. A pedestrian crossing has also been provided in the centre of Middletown to facilitate safer crossing of the road.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much of the Southern Division budget for roads resurfacing has been spent in North Down, in the last three financial years.

(AQW 7418/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not maintain a record of expenditure in the format requested, however I can provide the member with information on Capital Structural Maintenance expenditure by each District Council area within DfI Roads Southern Division (see Table 1 below).

Carriageway Resurfacing is one of the sub functions that make up the Structural Maintenance of the road network. Other functions within Capital Structural Maintenance are Footway Resurfacing, Surface Dressing, Structural Drainage and Structural Stability.

Table 1 Capital Structural Maintenance

Division	District Council Area	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
		£k		
South	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	6,003	12,017	10,263
	Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	5,758	10,524	11,858
	Ards & North Down Borough Council	2,448	4,852	4,072

Ards and North Down Borough Council area is allocated funding for Capital Structural Maintenance on the same basis as other District Councils, using established criteria such as road length and structural condition, to reflect need.

Within DfI Roads Southern Division, the Ards / North Down area has 15.2% of road length and received 17.2% (2017-18), 17.7% (2018-19) and 15.6% (2019-20) of the funding available for Capital Structural Maintenance respectively.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the current waiting time for learner drivers applying for the driving theory test, broken down by individual test location.

(AQW 7427/17-22)

Ms Mallon: From 6 July, driver theory tests resumed at all six theory test centres at reduced capacity, in order to comply with PHA advice and guidance on social distancing.

Since then, a number of steps have been taken to increase capacity for customers, including extending opening hours, and decreasing social distancing requirements from 2m to 1m+, in line with revised PHA guidance. The DVA is continuing to work with the theory test provider to monitor the situation, in order to identify what further measures may be required.

As recorded on 25 September, the current waiting time for learner drivers applying for the driving theory test, broken down by individual test location, is included in the table below.

Theory Test Centre	Waiting Time	Next Available Testing Date
Ballymena	10 weeks	04 December 2020
Belfast	12 weeks, 3 days	21 December 2020
Derry	12 weeks, 3 days	21 December 2020
Newry	11 weeks, 3 days	14 December 2020
Omagh	12 weeks, 3 days	21 December 2020
Portadown	11 weeks, 5 days	16 December 2020

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the recent Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey which overwhelmingly shows 67 per cent of our young people feel our communication and travel networks help people to connect with each other; and (ii) how we can build on this.

(AQW 7451/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The results of this survey are encouraging. It shows that for Outcome 11, over 2 in 3 respondents (67%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (Our communication and travel networks help people to connect with each other), which was the highest rate of agreement for any of the 12 outcomes.

This is good news, but I am keen to improve these figures further by working with partners to cultivate more active travel habits among our young people. In May I created a Walking and Cycling Champion to provide focus to my Department's efforts to provide better infrastructure for walking and cycling – including widened footways and pop-up cycle lanes. We are also working with Councils to improve walking and cycling opportunities across the North. In addition, in July I launched the walking campaign 'Great Things Happen'.

However, I know that if we are to encourage more children to replace the daily school run by an active and sustainable method of travel where possible, we need to create safer conditions. In addition to the Active School Travel Programme, which has been in operation for several years, I recently announced the roll out of part-time 20mph speed limit schemes at 100 schools across the North. Trials at a number of schools highlighted the effectiveness of this arrangement and it was found to have a positive impact on the reduction in mean speed, thereby encouraging young people to walk and cycle to school. I am also considering whether to pilot a number of 'school street' schemes.

We know that public transport is a vital connector for young people, and Translink works in partnership to deliver initiatives that aim to encourage more young people to use public transport to connect them to education, jobs and social activities.

Translink also has a dedicated team that engages with young people at their schools. Known as 'Team Translink', it provides information about best value tickets and helps with planning school journeys. These invaluable sessions enable Translink to provide tailored travel and ticket advice and encourage young people to use the bus or train for their school commute.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure why the threshold for the age at which vehicles are required to undergo an MOT test is set at four years.

(AQW 7491/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The timing of the first MOT test is set out in the Road Traffic Northern Ireland Order 1995 which aligns with the requirements of EU Directive 2014/45. This requires a first roadworthiness test within 4 years from the date on which the vehicle was first registered.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the progress of the A4 Enniskillen southern bypass.

(AQW 7492/17-22)

Ms Mallon: On 10 June 2020 I announced to the Assembly my intention to progress a number of strategic infrastructure and flagship projects in order to deliver for communities and help to address regional imbalance. I asked officials to push forward on the development of these important schemes, one of which is the A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass, and that work is ongoing.

I reaffirm my commitment to moving ahead with the Enniskillen Southern Bypass scheme and am currently considering the next steps.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure in what circumstances are people allowed to board their bicycles onto trains.

(AQW 7504/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My ambition to increase cycling journeys is reflected in the Programme for Government, and my commitment is to increase the proportion of journeys made by walking, cycling and public transport. The current Translink bicycle policy was drawn up in conjunction with Sustrans and is similar to other Train Operating Companies in the UK and Ireland. Bicycles are carried free of charge on all rail services after 0930 hours Monday to Friday. Up to 4 full sized bicycles can be carried at any one time within the designated bicycle area. Space is allocated on a first come, first served basis. There are no travel restrictions nor limit to the number of 'folding bicycles' carried on trains, provided they are completely folded down. Tandems, and tricycles are not permitted on any train. Given my focus on promoting active and sustainable travel I have asked Translink to explore options to enhance these opportunities on its services and at its facilities.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the policy of cycle parking in park and ride sites.

(AQW 7505/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to the promotion of sustainable transport measures and I want to ensure that in all transportation interventions, my Department includes measures to improve walking and cycling as key components of projects, including cycle parking at Park and Ride sites. I want to build infrastructure that makes walking and cycling journeys easier, safer and more convenient to undertake, including opportunities for multi-modal journeys.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the cost of (i) installing a rapid charge point; and (ii) the maintenance of the charge point network.

(AQW 7506/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). As such, my Department does not hold data of a commercial nature in respect of either the cost of installing a rapid charge point or the maintenance of the e-car charge point public network.

ESB can be contacted at ecars@esb.ie or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, DUBLIN 3, D03 A995.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 2860/17-22, for her assessment of the increasing number of failed reinstatement inspections.

(AQW 7543/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department recognises the importance of utility works to provide and maintain the essential services and communications infrastructure that we all depend on. My Department also plays an important role to ensure that works are properly co-ordinated, disruption for road users is minimised and that subsequent reinstatements do not adversely affect the structural integrity of the street.

The Street Works (NI) Order 1995 places a duty on any utility company to reinstate the street to the appropriate standards. The Order also makes provision for my officials to carry out investigations and inspections to determine whether an undertaker has complied with its duties, with the cost of such inspections being recovered from the utility. Where a reinstatement failure is identified, the utility is required to correct the defects at no cost to the Department.

There are many possible causes of reinstatement failures; poor quality materials, inclement weather during the works and resource issues can all contribute to premature reinstatement failures. The numbers of failed inspections, relative to the number of reinstatement inspections carried out each year, has over the last 3 years generally remained static at around 10%.

Improvement Plans have however been drawn-up by the utilities most affected and my officials are keeping a close watch on performance with the collective objective of bringing about a reduction in reinstatement failure rates.

While factors affecting reinstatement are outside the control of my officials, it is encouraging that the inspection and monitoring systems in place within my Department are proving to be effective in identifying failures and ensuring they are corrected promptly by the relevant utility contractors.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all departmental budget pressures.
(AQW 7544/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My budgetary pressures for 2020/21 are set out in the tables below. The residual 2020/21 pressures going into October In-Year Monitoring are subject to the outcome of the Monitoring Round and both the latest, and any future, Covid-19 Recovery exercise.

DfI is not proposing to bid for any additional funding for NI Water at this stage. However, should income projections prove to be overly optimistic or further restrictions result in less water being paid for by non-domestic customers, then further pressures will have to be met if we are to maintain our water and waste water services. The Department will be keeping this under close review and will consider presenting a bid in January Monitoring Round if necessary.

2020-21 Resource and Capital Pressures

Departmental Covid Recovery Bids

Description of Recovery bid	£m
Translink Lost passenger revenues	20.0
DVA lost Revenues	11.0
Rathlin Ferry lost Revenues	0.3
Crumlin Road Gaol lost revenues	0.2
Planning Application Fees (lost revenues)	0.1
Roads – Parking charges and PCNs (lost revenues)	3.7
Brexit Staff (with Treasury)	1.3
Resource Pressures	36.6

Summary of DfI October Monitoring Bids: Resource

Business Area	Description	£m
Roads	Winter Service and Routine Maintenance	3.0
All areas	Increased Holiday carry-forward accrual	1.6
Resource Total		4.6

Summary of DfI October Monitoring Bids: Capital

Business Area	Description	£m
Public Transport	Belfast Transport Hub	1.6
Roads	Structural Maintenance	5.5
Roads	Street Lighting	1.0
Planning	Regional Planning System	1.0
Capital Total		9.1

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the required budget to repair all reported street light outages; and (ii) her remaining street light maintenance budget for the current financial year.
(AQW 7545/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to be able to confirm that I have allocated a budget of £5m for street lighting maintenance for the current financial year. This funding will allow for the provision of a full street lighting repair service that will be delivered by my Department's internal contractor and external contractors.

As of the end of August 2020, £1.1m has been spent on repairs with £3.9m remaining to cover the rest of the financial year.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has sufficient resources to complete the required number of road and footpath reinstatement inspections.

(AQW 7546/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Street Works (NI) Order 1995 makes provision for my officials to carry out investigations and inspections to determine whether utility companies have complied with their duties, with the cost of such inspections being recovered from the utility.

In 2019/20, my Department completed 13,953 sample inspections, which equates to 28.8% and this was marginally short of the target of 30% for the year. Unfortunately, in the current year, due to restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a reduction in the availability of staff to undertake inspections during the early part of the year. Consequently, the 30% sample inspection target may also not be met in 2020/21 but I am hopeful that as we return to a more normal operating environment that the number of inspections carried out will improve beyond previous annual targets.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she will improve the electronic vehicle charging network.

(AQW 7548/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC (Rapid) charge points in Northern Ireland. The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and the market is also open to other commercial operators who would wish to provide charging infrastructure. Departmental officials are currently engaging with ESB to discuss how to assist with their plans to replace approx. 70 charge points and improve the existing network.

There have been a number of recent developments that are likely to impact expansion and improvement of the network. For example, the Utility Regulator's recent decision to remove the Maximum Resale Price (MRP) on the electricity cost of charge points will allow commercial operators to charge above cost price of electricity supply. This should give clarity for operators wishing to provide commercial services in Northern Ireland.

The Office for Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV) continues to provide support for the development of Ultra Low Emission Vehicle (ULEV) policy UK Wide 'Road to Zero' Strategy and infrastructure across GB and NI. My Departmental officials have a strong working relationship with OLEV and continue to engage with them on the outworking of the strategy.

My Department is also considering further actions in relation to the decarbonisation of transport as part of work to inform the Department for the Economy's draft Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland.

I fully recognise the importance of having modern, reliable public electric vehicle charging infrastructure in providing confidence for users of ultra-low emission vehicles and in respect of the connectivity improvements this would bring. I am committed to seeing this infrastructure increased as part of my Department's climate change action. The DAERA Minister and I met earlier this year to discuss opportunities for partnership working. As such, officials are currently exploring a range of options and solutions to enhance the charge point infrastructure, improve lives and tackle the climate emergency, particularly, in the context of COVID-19 recovery plans.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) when she intends to answer my letters of 7 August 2020 and 3 September 2020 in relation to Bogside Residents Parking; (ii) to provide details of the consultation which she announced in the Derry Journal; and (iii) for an update on the agreed pilot scheme that her Department was to establish.

(AQW 7561/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials have carried out a detailed search of the departmental system for your letters and I replied to your letter of 7 August 2020 concerning the water quality in the Bishop Street area on 26 August 2020. We had no record of receiving another letter of this date concerning residents' parking but are now in receipt of it after officials contacted your office upon receipt of this Assembly Question. I have since replied to both your 7th August and 3rd September letters.

The first residents' parking scheme in Rugby Road / College Park Avenue, Belfast, came into operation during April 2018. A review of the scheme, which reflected the needs, experiences and feedback of residents, is currently being considered. I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme inform wider policy on implementing residents' parking schemes.

This review is nearing completion and I anticipate that I will be able to announce its findings in the very near future. In advance of this I trust you will appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to respond fully on this matter, however I will provide further information on the Rossville Residents' Parking Scheme at a future date.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to provide funding to Derry City and Strabane District Council for baiting of manholes, similar to that given to Belfast City Council.

(AQW 7564/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised me that it does not, in general, have agreements with local authorities in relation to baiting of manholes. One exception to this is an agreement with Belfast City Council. However, this agreement does not include the provision of funding to Belfast City Council to use for the baiting of manholes in the Belfast City Council area.

I have been advised by NI Water that it, and relevant public agencies, attend meetings at the request of Local Authority Environmental Health Departments to discuss specific rodent problems. The level of such service provided to Councils is

defined by the scale of the issue and the required response. Despite NI Water having an agreement on this matter with Belfast City Council, there is no difference in the level of service NI Water provides to other Council areas if required, including Derry City and Strabane District Council.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are any plans to construct a bridge at Bannfoot, where the Upper Bann meets Lough Neagh.
(AQW 7570/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A proposal for a walking and cycling bridge at Bannfoot did not feature in the greenway network set out in 'Exercise – Explore – Enjoy: a Strategic Plan for Greenways'. Part of the reason for that was that it was not included in any Council greenway proposals put forward to the Department.

I am keen that my Department works with Councils and with all stakeholders to deliver on projects that have the potential to improve the lives of people and connect communities. However, a proposal to build a bridge at this location would be for the local Council to consider in the first instance in consultation with the local communities and stakeholders.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure when roads in Barleyfield, Culmore will be adopted as to undertake roadworks that will allow Derry City and Strabane District Council bin lorries to access the street.
(AQW 7578/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Barleyfield housing development was granted planning permission for 211 dwellings in April 2017. The construction of the development has been split into six separate phases, with an adoption agreement in place between the developer and the Department for each phase.

I am advised that NI Water has just recently confirmed that the sewerage infrastructure meets their required standards in the first four phases of development and as a result my Department will very shortly be progressing the roads in these phases towards preliminary adoption. I understand that Derry City & Strabane Council will then undertake bin collections on these phases of the development.

Once the preliminary adoption of these phases is complete and following a 1 year maintenance period, the road infrastructure will be adopted by the Department.

Officials have also advised that house building is still ongoing in phases 5 and 6 of this development and the road infrastructure is not yet ready for adoption. My officials will continue to closely monitor and assist the developer move towards timely completion and adoption of these remaining phases.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of road bonds in place in the Foyle constituency; (ii) the total value of these bonds held; and (iii) the estimated cost of work to be done under these road bonds so that the roads can be adopted.
(AQW 7579/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department holds bond information relating to roads within private developments that are proposed for adoption by council area but not by constituency therefore I am unable to provide the information requested for the Foyle constituency.

However I can advise that my Department currently holds 222 road bonds for the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, which includes the Foyle constituency, and these have a remaining value of £12,562,655.

As the process is developer led, my Department does not hold detailed records of the estimated costs for completing roads within private developments, however the remaining value of the bond is a good indicator of the estimated costs of completing the roads in these developments.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has carried out scoping work in relation to historical unadopted roads.
(AQW 7596/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department manages the adoption of roads that are proposed for adoption through the Private Streets determination process which is undertaken as part of the Planning process. Once Planning Permission is received, my officials work closely with developers and financial institutions to pursue adoption of these development roads in a timely fashion.

There are also a number of historical unadopted roads and laneways within Northern Ireland that sit outside of this process. Article 9 of the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 provides for my Department to consider adoption of such roads if the majority of the owners or frontagers request it and the road or street is first brought up to the required adoption standard.

A scoping study was carried out in 2011 which found that there were over 620 km of unadopted roads and laneways in Northern Ireland. This figure did not include private roads that fell within the normal Private Streets determination process, served less than 5 dwellings, were commercial/industrial sites or back entries. The cost of bringing these private roads up to current standards was estimated to be back then, in the region of £300 million. This figure will have undoubtedly increased

since. This did not include for additional items such as land purchase, structures, embankments, utility works, consultancy fees, etc.

While I understand there would be a desire from frontagers on private roads and lanes to have improvement works carried out by my Department, this is simply not feasible due to the current budget position and the many pressures faced by my Department.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the proposed footpath on Mountjoy Road, Brocagh, Co. Tyrone.

(AQW 7597/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The 2020-2022 Local Transport and Safety Measures Programme for the Mid Ulster Council Area includes a scheme to realign and widen approximately 500 metres of carriageway on the B161 Mountjoy Road between Saint Brigid's Primary School and Brocagh GFC. This scheme also includes provision of a footway along this length. Design options have been completed and cost estimates have been prepared. Delivery of the scheme will be dependent upon the availability of funding and successful acquisition of land.

I can assure you that my Department remains committed to the scheme and that my officials will continue in their efforts to deliver this as soon as it is practicable to do so.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to carry out a review of the criteria around the usage of brown tourism signs.

(AQW 7598/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The policy used for the provision of brown and white tourist signs ensures that eligible and harder to find tourist destinations are provided with appropriate signage to help visitors locate them. The policy has been jointly agreed between the Department for the Economy, Tourism Northern Ireland and my Department. The eligibility criteria used is intended to ensure that applications are treated on a fair and balanced basis, and that traffic management and road safety considerations are given priority. I can confirm that there are no current plans to review the policy.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she is working with the Department of Health to ensure the new COVID-19 test centre situated at Kernan playing fields, Portadown, will not have an impact on the already busy infrastructure within the area.

(AQW 7608/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department is aware how busy the road network is within the Kernan area of Portadown, especially in the morning peak in the vicinity of the roundabout. I am advised that there are no safety related access issues at Kernan playing fields and also that the arrangements at this site ensure that testing will take place outside of the morning peak period in order to minimise the impact on traffic. Testing centres like this one are critical to saving lives and I am committed to supporting health colleagues efforts and working in partnership with them in the fight against this virus. I can assure you I have asked officials to continue to monitor the situation in the vicinity of this site and to raise any issues with the Department of Health to seek to minimise any disruption that is caused.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of people since 1 September 2020 who have received a notice of redundancy in Translink, and the grades of the staff affected.

(AQW 7629/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A total of 54 people have received a notice of redundancy since 1 September 2020 and the grades of staff affected are: 27 bus drivers; 5 ancillary staff; 20 management and other indirect staff and 2 inspectors.

This incorporates redundancies associated with the decision that Ulsterbus Tours, which is a separate commercial entity not funded by my Department, should cease trading.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider including Eglinton Primary School in the 20mph speed limit scheme.

(AQW 7641/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from their schools on a daily basis.

I am determined that using the roads around all of our schools will be safer for everyone, and it is my intention that through future programmes many more schools will have a part-time 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates.

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 100 in this year's programme. Unfortunately based on its assessment score Eglinton Primary School was not ranked as highly as other schools included within this year's programme. However, I do intend to take forward a further tranche of part-time speed limits at schools and it will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps her Department is taking to address traffic congestion and safety concerns at Crescent Link, Londonderry.

(AQW 7642/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that the owners of the Crescent Link Retail Park have announced development proposals which include a new exit and increased parking spaces and it is believed that this will help ease traffic problems at the site.

Following receipt of a number of requests, my Department has programmed traffic and pedestrian surveys to inform an assessment of the need for a controlled pedestrian crossing at the roundabout adjacent to Crescent Link Retail Park. When the surveys have been completed the proposal will be assessed against current policy to determine if it meets the minimum criteria required to merit provision of a controlled crossing.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what road resurfacing projects are planned for the Derry City and Strabane District Council area during this financial year.

(AQW 7644/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the 2020-2021 financial year it is proposed to resurface the following roads at an estimated cost of £2.5million. Some of the schemes listed below have been completed or are in progress.

Road No	Road Name	Length (m)
A5	Victoria Road at the Everglades	685
A5	Melmount Road at Milltown Bridge	175
A5	Melmount Road at Knockroe Road	235
A515	Ballyarnett Roundabout	230
A1002	Foyle Embankment Water Street to Whitaker Street	235
A1002	Foyle Embankment opposite Bus Depot	170
B523	Chapel Road	510
B507	Branch Road	205
B72	Fyfin Road at McCormick's	690
B46	Killymore Road, Newtownstewart	1980
C508	Ardmore Road	1210
U4013	Castlemurray Estate Strabane	105
U1556	Wapping Lane	136
U1529	Cornshell Fields	535
U1515	Kingsfort Park	580
U1131	Carmony Road, Eglinton	420

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures she will take to address speeding vehicles passing (i) Ballylifford Primary School, Ballinderry, Co Derry; and (ii) St. Malachy's Primary School, Drummullan, Co Derry.

(AQW 7650/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In support of Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy 2020, I have committed £2m funding in this year's capital budget towards the introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits. This will allow speed limits to be progressed at around 100 schools across Northern Ireland in the current financial year. It is acknowledged that these measures would benefit most schools in that they will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near the schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from their schools on a daily basis

Given the restricted budgets for works of this nature, as well as the practicalities of delivery, it was necessary to limit the number of schools to 100 in this year's programme. Unfortunately based on its assessment score Ballylifford Primary School and Drumullan Primary School were not ranked as highly as other schools included within this year's programme. However, I do intend to take forward a further tranche of part-time speed limits at schools and both schools will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

In recent years my Department has provided a number of traffic management measures on Ballinderry Bridge Road, Ballylifford, including a 30mph speed limit with gateway signage, flashing school signs, high friction surfacing, SCHOOL and KEEP CLEAR markings and zig zag warning lines at the school frontage. Under current policy, traffic calming in the form of vertical speed measures (e.g. speed ramps), is not considered appropriate at this location due to the traffic volumes and nature of the road.

An assessment for a traffic calming scheme on the Moneyhaw Road in Drummullan has been completed, however, it did not score as highly as other potential schemes in the Mid Ulster Council area. Flashing warning school signs, high friction surfacing, SCHOOL and KEEP CLEAR markings and yellow zig zag warning lines have already been provided at the school.

Speed limits are enforced by the PSNI and, if drivers are exceeding the speed limits at particular locations then this should be brought to their attention. I have asked my officials to refer this matter on to the local PSNI Traffic Branch for their consideration.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to her assurance that funding was being allocated to ensure restoration of a normal street lighting repair service, why the stated target of five working days for the repair of routine street lighting outages, and 24 hours for group outages, is not being met in (i) Clady village; and (ii) Killen village.

(AQW 7656/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I wish to assure you that my staff make every effort to meet the streetlight repair targets however, for various reasons, this may not on occasions be achievable.

In relation to Clady village, a number of streetlights had been burning 24/7 for a period of time as a result of works being undertaken by Northern Ireland Electricity. My staff have now fitted a temporary control box to the lighting system to rectify this situation.

I am advised that there have also been a few faults reported within Verner Park, Killen over the summer months and the cause was eventually traced to an underground cable fault which has since been repaired. While my staff have responded to all notifications of outages, I understand there was a period between mid-August and mid-September when lights appear to have been out but my staff had not been notified. I can assure you that, once my staff were made aware of the problem, works were prioritised and the underground cable was repaired at the earliest opportunity.

I can confirm that I have allocated funding to allow a full street lighting repair service for 2020/2021 and would ask that public representatives and the general public use the on-line reporting system as soon as outages are noticed to ensure that my staff are in a position to react as quickly as possible.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many pot holes have been reported for repair for North Down, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7674/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not maintain such records by constituency area, however I can provide the member with information on pothole repairs in the District Council area.

Financial Year	Number of Potholes Repaired in Ards and North Down District Council Area
2015/16	4151
2016/17	3523
2017/18	3288
2018/19	6228
2019/20	6190

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many street lights have been reported for repair for North Down, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7675/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not record information in the format requested and therefore is unable to provide the number of street lights reported for repair by constituency. However, I can confirm that within DfI Roads Southern Division, which includes the North Down constituency, the number of street lights reported for repair in each of the last five years is as follows:

Year	Reported Outages
2015 - 2016	9,434
2016 - 2017	11,124

Year	Reported Outages
2017 - 2018	12,827
2018 - 2019	11,345
2019 - 2020	13,060
Total	57,790

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the full reopening of MOT Centres; and (ii) how she anticipates dealing with a backlog caused with the issue of Temporary Exemption Certificates.

(AQW 7688/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been a gradual resumption of MOT services from 1 June 2020, when the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

From 20 July, the DVA resumed MOT testing, at all test centres, for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles that are not able to avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). This includes taxis and buses due a first time test, vehicles not previously registered in Northern Ireland, vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months that includes vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships.

From 1 September, MOT testing was further extended to include four year old cars and motorbikes and three year old light goods vehicles. Vehicle testing also resumed for vehicles in this category that currently have a TEC, they will be called for test when the TEC expires. In addition, the DVA also resumed the testing of heavy goods vehicles and trailers.

Vehicle testing has now resumed at all 15 MOT centres. Belfast MOT centre was recently handed back to DVA from the Belfast HSC Trust with HGV and trailer testing resuming from 29 September. The DVA is currently in the process of installing new vehicle lifts at Belfast, which will allow testing for all vehicle categories to resume by mid-October.

TECs will continue to be issued for all other eligible vehicles until vehicle testing services can be fully reinstated. Vehicles whose existing MOT certificate expired from 26 March 2020 or will expire before testing for their category resumes will be automatically exempt from testing for a full 12 months, with their new MOT expiry date pushed forward into 2021.

For vehicles which have previously been issued with a TEC as a result of issues with the scissor lifts, their TEC will also be automatically extended to the maximum period of 12 months. Before the TEC period ends, the DVA will issue a reminder notice to the registered keeper of the vehicle with instructions on how to book a test.

Finally, it is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice to ensure that necessary and proportionate control measures relating to Covid-19 are incorporated into its risk assessments for safe vehicle testing. Like many other public facing services, vehicle testing capacity will increase as restrictions ease and as risk assessments are updated. In the interim the careful management of TECs should ensure there is no backlog when normal testing services resume.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has considered using the bond secured under the Private Streets (Construction) Regulations (NI) 1994 to complete the (i) roads; (ii) sewerage infrastructure; (iii) streetlights; and (iv) footpaths in Hunters Lodge, Lurgan.

(AQW 7698/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised that NI Water is in the process of agreeing a bond with the developer for foul and storm sewer extensions on Annesborough Road to Hunters Lodge. Completion of these works will allow the builder to connect the sewers within the development to the extended sewer network. My Department cannot pursue the enforcement of the road bonds to complete the roads within Hunters Lodge until NI Water installs the foul and storm sewers along Annesborough Road as far as the access of the site.

The builder has in place separate agreements and bonds with NI Water for the various phases of the development to provide the sewerage infrastructure within the development. Once these sewerage works are complete DfI Roads will pursue the builder to complete road works which will include a right turn facility, street lighting and footways.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following the proposal from DfI Roads, for a timeframe for the installation of speed humps at Derrychrin Primary School, Ballinderry.

(AQW 7751/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A traffic calming scheme on the Drumeeny Road close to Derrychrin Primary School is included within the 2020-21 Local Transport and Safety Measures Programme for the Mid Ulster Council area. The Department is currently undertaking a consultation exercise which includes formal notification of the scheme in the local papers with a closing date of 21st October 2020 for receipt of representation.

A number of representations have already been received and these will need to be considered and addressed before the scheme can progress.

I can assure you that my Department remains committed to the scheme and my officials will continue with their efforts to deliver this scheme as soon as it is practicable to do so.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of recent works having commenced on approximately 1.8km of the B160, Ballinderry Bridge Road, whether she can confirm (i) the schedule; and (ii) the date of completion of the remainder of the stretch of road as far as Ballinderry Bridge.

(AQW 7752/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department intends to resurface the B160 Ballinderry Bridge Road in two phases. Phase 1 is currently on site and comprises approximately 1.8km of road from Main Street, Coagh towards Ballinderry. This phase, valued at £320k, is scheduled for completion on 2 October 2020.

Phase 2 is approximately 1.85km in length and subject to the availability of funding, the intention is to complete it during the next financial year.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has been consulted for their assessment of the potential new build of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School at Balloo/Gransha.

(AQW 7755/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Officials from my Department have confirmed that they have not been consulted for an assessment of the potential new build of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School at Balloo/Gransha. However, officials did attend a Pre Application Discussion in September 2017 to provide advice on transportation matters for a number of potential site options for the project.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail current contractual arrangements in place for provision of bus shelters in terms of (i) installation of new shelters; and (ii) maintenance of current shelters.[R]

(AQW 7759/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Bus shelters are either owned by my Department or local councils. In 2015, the Department requested that Translink take over the management of its stock of approximately 1,400 bus shelters.

- (i) Translink manages ongoing requests for new bus shelters on behalf of my Department. These requests are reviewed by Translink Operational Teams and if the potential site falls within their policy for new shelters, a site estimate will be developed and planning application submitted. Should planning be approved and the cost estimate for erecting a shelter in this location be reasonable, it will be entered into the capital programme. Should the site requested not meet the requirements of the policy for a new shelter, then there is always the option for a local council to provide funding itself, should it consider the case merits such investment and ongoing maintenance.
- (ii) Translink on behalf of the Department has engaged a contractor who is responsible for cleaning and maintaining the bus shelters, including repairing vandalism. This contract also provides for the installation of new or replacement bus shelters where required.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider bidding for capital funding to support local councils for the installation of new bus shelters.[R]

(AQW 7760/17-22)

Ms Mallon: 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 £300,000 to Translink for the refurbishment and erection of new bus shelters.

The Executive has initiated a Comprehensive Spending Review, which promises a 4 year capital funding envelope for my Department. I will then be assessing the pressures across my Department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will work with her Dublin counterpart, Eamon Ryan, to address the decision made by Bus Éireann to cut services from Dublin to Belfast.

(AQW 7775/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I was informed by Minister Ryan's office on Saturday 26 September that the Bus Éireann Board would be recommending the indefinite suspension of the Belfast – Dublin service. As this is one of Bus Éireann's commercial routes, Minister Ryan had no input into the decision.

I am committed to securing island wide services between Belfast and Dublin and raised this matter with Minister Ryan at yesterday's NSMC Transport meeting. My Department will continue to work to provide services for our communities North-South and will work with Translink to minimise the overall impact to passengers.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what road resurfacing projects are planned for this year in the Newry and Armagh constituency.

(AQW 7776/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to confirm that my Department's programme of planned road resurfacing schemes is underway within Newry and Armagh constituency and currently includes schemes at:

A29	Lonsdale Road Armagh
B133	Bessbrook Road, Markethill
U7008	Callanbridge/Nursery Road, Armagh
U8431	Tullynawood Road, Keady
U5345	Lower Newtown Road, Meigh
U5500	Dungormley Estate, Newtownhamilton
U5653	Thomas Street, Bessbrook
C213	Tullyherron Road, Whitecross

The Department is currently finalising details of its works programmes which includes further schemes; these will be included in the DfI Roads Southern Division reports to Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon and Newry Mourne & Down District Councils which will be issued shortly.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what level of funding her Department allocated to deal with winter service pressures prior to additional funding being allocated.

(AQW 7781/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Winter Service average normal budget requirement is £7m but has in the past been £10m for a bad winter as was the case in 2017-18.

I have therefore set aside £3m from the baseline budget to be held to part fund Winter Service in the expectation that further funding would be made available from in year monitoring as is normally the case.

I welcome the recent £5m allocation from the Covid bids exercise which will make a much needed contribution and my Department has therefore prudently bid for the remaining £2m as part of October Monitoring on the basis that this winter could require more than the normal.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many planning decisions her Department has made since the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill was brought into force; and (ii) how many of those decisions would have previously been subject to Executive agreement.

(AQW 7797/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since the coming into effect of the Executive Committee (Functions) Act the Department has made three planning decisions: the approval of the North South Interconnector (two decisions, references O/2009/0792/F & O/2013/0214/F) and the approval of the planning application for sand extraction at Lough Neagh (Reference - LA03/2017/0310/F). The North South Interconnector decisions have formally issued and the Department intends to issue the Lough Neagh sand extraction decision when a Section 76 Planning Agreement has been satisfactorily concluded.

Whilst not final planning decisions the Department, by way of Notices of Opinion, has also announced that it is of the opinion that planning permission and listed building consent for existing development at the Adelphi Hotel, Portrush should be approved (LA01/2017/1287/F and LA01/2017/1289/LBC), however planning permission and listed building consent for a proposed extension to the hotel should be refused (LA01/2017/0251/F and LA01/2017/1289/LBC).

The Executive Committee (Functions) Act seeks to deal with the Buick Court of Appeal ruling which elided the concept of Ministerial or Departmental 'interests' with that of 'responsibilities'. Prior to that ruling the determination of planning applications was not considered to engage cross-cutting constraints because, while such applications might have been of interest to other departments, they did not engage their responsibilities. Planning applications had never been referred to the Executive.

The Executive Committee (Functions) Act (NI) 2020, clarifies that the authority for determining planning applications remains the responsibility of the Department for Infrastructure and the Minister in charge of that Department.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure, further to her announcement on 20 March 2020 reducing public transport services in response to the COVID-19 outbreak consistent with government public health advice, what discussions her Department is having with Translink regarding planning for the restoration of full bus and rail timetables for workers returning to offices in the greater Belfast area.

(AQW 7802/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink monitors passenger loadings on a daily basis and is operating over 80% of normal pre-Covid 19 bus and rail services carrying around 45% of normal passenger volumes.

Whilst there has been a gradual increase in passenger numbers as people return to the workplace, sufficient capacity remains across the network to meet this demand, as well as ensuring that social distancing can be maintained on services. Service levels are being kept under review and will be adjusted in line with customer demand should that be required and in accordance with public health advice.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i), in light of (a) the criticism of planning enforcement in the Mills Review in 2013; (b) the Assembly's criticism of planning enforcement at Mobuoy in 2014; and (c) the European Commission's current Pilot Case 7640/15/ENVI (Environmental Enforcement in Northern Ireland) initiated in 2015, for her assessment of Derry City and Strabane District Council's failure to halt ongoing unauthorised sand extraction at Kildoag Road; and (ii) whether her Department will exercise its enforcement powers and intervene to prevent the creation of a site that would be vulnerable to the disposal of illegal waste.

(AQW 7857/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Any enforcement action in relation to this site is the remit and responsibility of Derry City and Strabane District Council in the first instance. My Department has, and continues to engage with the Council in relation to this case.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the recent decision by Bus Éireann to suspend operations on the route, whether support will be provided to Translink to enable continued provision of the Belfast to Dublin coach service.[R]

(AQW 7861/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As a result of the impact of Covid 19 on people's travel, Bus Éireann, has had to rationalise and consolidate its commercial services. The company has, therefore, decided to indefinitely suspend the Dublin – Belfast route, which was run on a commercial basis. Services on this route are operated on a joint basis between Translink and Bus Éireann. This decision will only affect those services delivered by Bus Éireann, and Translink is continuing to provide services on this route, which is part of its public service commitments.

I am firmly committed to ensuring our public transport services continue to operate and I continue to make bids for support to the Finance Minister and the Executive to ensure that Translink has the budget it requires to deliver all of its services across our island.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures are being put in place to enable the urgent resumption of taxi driver practical tests.

(AQW 7873/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) is working on proposals to resume taxi driving tests as soon as possible with the priority of keeping staff and customers safe in line with public health advice and guidance.

However, due to the nature of these tests and the minimum time required for the on road driving element being 60 minutes, they must be fully risk assessed to ensure they can be delivered safely.

Whenever the DVA is in a position to announce the resumption of taxi driver practical tests, they will make that information available on NIDirect and through social media channels.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will provide a copy of the Habitats Regulations Assessment carried out for the Hightown Incinerator.

(AQW 7932/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Habitats Regulations Assessment is currently in draft form and will be considered and finalised by my officials in coming to a view on the application. The Assessment is a material consideration in the determination of the planning application. As I have recently advised, my officials are continuing to progress the application in line with planning policy to a point where a decision is ready to be made.

The finalised Habitats Regulations Assessment will be available to view on the Planning Portal when a decision has been made on the Hightown Incinerator planning application.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's plans to extend residential parking schemes across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7934/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The first residents' parking scheme in Rugby Road / College Park Avenue, Belfast, came into operation during April 2018. A review of the scheme, which will reflect the needs, experiences and feedback of residents, is currently nearing completion. I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme, and the other potential schemes that did not make it to implementation, inform wider policy on implementation of residents' parking schemes to the benefit of communities.

Work to finalise the review by officials is ongoing and I can confirm that any findings will be made publically available. I will consider any new schemes in light of these findings.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) when MOT testing will re-open for online booking in Derry; and (ii) how she will prevent a booking bottleneck to avoid the scenario where drivers are forced to keep their cars off the road due to their MOT temporary extension expiring.

(AQW 7950/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been a gradual resumption of MOT services from 1 June 2020, when the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

From 20 July, the DVA resumed MOT testing, at all test centres, for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles that are not able to avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). This includes taxis and buses due a first time test, vehicles not previously registered in Northern Ireland, vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months that includes vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships.

From 1 September, MOT testing was further extended to include four year old cars and motorbikes and three year old light goods vehicles. Vehicle testing also resumed for vehicles in this category that currently have a TEC, they will be called for test when the TEC expires. In addition, the DVA also resumed the testing of heavy goods vehicles and trailers.

Vehicle testing has now resumed at all 15 MOT centres. Belfast MOT centre was recently handed back to DVA from the Belfast HSC Trust with HGV and trailer testing resuming from 29 September. The DVA is currently in the process of installing new vehicle lifts at Belfast, which will allow testing for all vehicle categories to resume by mid-October.

The DVA reinstated its online booking system for HGVs and Trailers on 1 October and from 12 October this facility will be available for all other eligible vehicle categories being brought forward for test.

TECs will continue to be issued for all other eligible vehicles until vehicle testing services can be fully reinstated. Vehicles whose existing MOT certificate expired from 26 March 2020 or will expire before testing for their category resumes will be automatically exempt from testing for a full 12 months, with their new MOT expiry date pushed forward into 2021.

For vehicles which have previously been issued with a TEC as a result of issues with the scissor lifts, their TEC will also be automatically extended to the maximum period of 12 months. Before the TEC period ends, the DVA will issue a reminder notice to the registered keeper of the vehicle with instructions on how to book a test.

Finally, it is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice to ensure that necessary and proportionate control measures relating to Covid-19 are incorporated into its risk assessments for safe vehicle testing. Like many other public facing services, vehicle testing capacity will increase as restrictions ease and as risk assessments are updated. In the interim the careful management of TECs should ensure there is no backlog when normal testing services resume.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps have been taken to ensure that the Driver and Vehicle Agency's online booking system will be able to cope with demand for bookings when vehicle tests are fully reinstated on 12 October 2020.

(AQW 8107/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In anticipation of high demand for bookings when vehicle tests are fully reinstated on 12 October, the Driver and Vehicle Agency has introduced a queueing system to their online booking system to ensure that demand for bookings is managed in a controlled manner and the system is able to cope with the number of customers attempting to book at any given time.

The queueing system will clearly indicate that the customer is in a queue, confirming their queue position and anticipated waiting time to manage customer expectations and ensure that the system does not crash.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans there are to put additional shelter in place on the Strangford ferry to protect passengers, including school children, who are unable to access the passenger deck due to social distancing measures.

(AQW 8133/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Arrangements for additional morning and afternoon passenger-only sailings were put in place to facilitate the transportation of the large number of school children who need to travel at the same time. The use of the main open deck as an outdoor area, reduces the risk of Covid-19 transmission, while also maximising the number of schoolchildren who can be carried. Unfortunately in applying the public health advice, this does mean that on occasions passengers may be exposed to inclement weather conditions on the 7 minute journey. Foot passengers are therefore recommended to wear suitable clothing.

While at present there are no plans to put additional shelter in place, officials are exploring options and impacts including on passenger capacity.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's plans to install suicide prevention barriers on bridges and other areas of the transport network.

(AQO 831/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I fully recognise that our infrastructure has an important role to play, both in terms of improving mental health and preventing suicides, and I and my Department are committed to ensuring we contribute fully to this agenda.

I appreciate that engineering solutions, such as barriers on bridges, may provide part of the answer. However, in and of itself, it does not address the underlying problem. As a result, my Department continues to work in partnership with stakeholders to consider positive actions that can be taken along a number of locations, including the M2/Westlink corridor.

I recently met with the interim Mental Health Champion, Professor Siobhan O'Neill, and assured her of my full commitment, and that of my Department, to working to address the serious problems associated with mental health in the country.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why £2.8 million has been invested in starting six new greenway projects before the partially-developed Comber Greenway project is completed.

(AQO 823/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The £2.8 million of capital funding that I announced several weeks ago has been allocated to 4 councils to help develop six greenway projects that are ready to be taken forward for construction in 2020/21 – £1.1 million of that investment is expected to be made in 2020/21. The funding will be provided on a match funding basis and will be subject to the approval of Councils' business cases – so the total investment in greenways will be greater.

My Department has written to those Councils who did not identify any greenway projects that were ready for construction this financial year. Councils have been asked to provide a business case for the proposals they had identified where construction could start in the next financial year (2021/22). Decisions regarding potential funding allocations for any future greenway projects will depend on the budget provided to the Department for 2021/22.

A total of around £1.5 million has been invested on the Comber Greenway route in recent years at a number of locations by my Department and other stakeholders. I hope the Member will agree that it is not the case that the Comber Greenway has been neglected.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline how Irish Sea border infrastructure at Northern Ireland's ports is being built at the behest of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs without obtaining regular planning permission.

(AQO 825/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In relation to DAERA's plans to place infrastructure for sanitary and phytosanitary checks at our ports, it is my understanding that they are currently considering their position in terms of the submission of applications to the relevant councils for what are called Certificates of Lawful Use or Development for their proposals.

As Members will be aware, it is the case that you can perform certain types of work without needing to apply for planning permission. These 'permitted development rights' as they are often called apply if your plans fall within certain restrictions set out in The Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015.

As with anyone proposing a development, it is for them to ensure they have the relevant authority and/or permissions to undertake those works. As such it is common, and indeed advisable for anyone who believes that they do not require planning permission for their plans, to apply to a council for a lawful development certificate. It is my understanding that DAERA are currently considering their position with regards to this process route.

Councils may grant a Certificates of Lawful Use or Development if the proposed development would be lawful for planning purposes – for example where planning permission is not required. That consideration is a legal one, not a policy one and once such a certificate is granted the proposed development or use is presumed lawful.

As the Department for Infrastructure itself has no powers to consider such applications, the matter as to whether DAERA's plans are permitted development is entirely one for the relevant councils to consider.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she will address the reserve list for road resurfacing in North Down.

(AQO 826/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It has been recognised for many years that the road network has a large backlog of essential maintenance works and that funding has been well below the level necessary to allow the desired standard to be achieved.

I will continue to stress the need for investment in road maintenance with my Executive colleagues and for funding to be made available to allow my Department to adequately maintain the road network, this being critical to many aspects of business and personal life across Northern Ireland.

The reserve list referred to is a list of potential schemes which have been identified either through resurfacing requests or as a result of ongoing inspections. The list is not exhaustive and as the impact associated with traffic, weather and utility works continues to place pressure on the road network, additional schemes may be added.

Taking forward the reserve list is subject to funding availability. My Department has recently submitted a bid through October Monitoring round which, if successful, would allow further resurfacing schemes to be delivered across Northern Ireland, including within the North Down area.

In the current year I have also allocated £14m towards street light column replacement to counteract reduced allocations in recent years as well as the increasing age of the street lighting stock. I have also allocated sufficient funding to ensure that a full street lighting outage repair service can be delivered in 2020/2021.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to repair and maintain cycle lanes.

(AQO 827/17-22)

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. The term 'road' includes all adopted footways, cycle tracks and verges.

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 and a safe highway while offering value for money. The Safety Standards and procedures currently in operation establish frequencies for inspections and specify response times for the repair of defects, including on cycle lanes.

As the Member will be aware I announced an investment of £75m in the structural maintenance of the road network in 2020/2021. Although the COVID 19 pandemic led to some initial delays in the commencement of the 2020-21 road maintenance programmes, these are now well underway and the completed renewal work will benefit cyclists and all road users.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on discussions with her counterpart in Dublin on all-island infrastructure projects.

(AQO 828/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am fully committed to improving connectivity across the island. I am working with my counterpart in Dublin on a number of key all-island projects aimed at improving the lives of people across the island.

This includes enhancing the rail network to create a spine of connectivity on the island, the A5 project, Narrow Water Bridge and the Ulster Canal; all of which are commitments within the New Decade New Approach.

Minister Ryan and I have a number of shared ambitions on public transport, active travel and climate action and we are both committed to improving the lives of all our citizens who share this island.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure what assessment her Department has made of the viability of implementing a scheme similar to the Big Bike Revival in England.

(AQO 829/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Big Bike Revival, which the Member refers to in his question, is a programme developed by the cycling charity Cycling UK, formally the Cycling Touring Club or CTC.

The programme was trialled in England in 2014 and started in March 2015 with annual funding of around £1 million from the Department for Transport in London. The programme was extended to Scotland in 2016.

For many years my Department has worked with the Public Health Agency in delivering joint programmes such as the Active School Travel programme. The Agency provides funding annually for a number of programmes in the community which include elements of the Big Bike Revival. The 'Leading the Way' programme (which my Department participates in) has many similarities to the Big Bike Revival, such as on-road cycle training, bike maintenance and led bike rides.

I am keen to work in partnership with other Departments and statutory agencies to deliver projects and programmes which will enable more people to walk and cycle as part of their everyday activity.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Ministerial Advisory Panel.

(AQO 830/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Ministerial Advisory Panel on Infrastructure was established 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 comprised a small group of independent experts and since their first meeting on the 25 August 2020, they have engaged with a significant number of key stakeholders across these islands via written evidence gathering and virtual engagement sessions. The Panel have also considered global best practice and engaged with a number of other Infrastructure authorities.

The Panel presented their recommendations to me on 29 September 2020 and have provided me with a written report setting out their detailed findings.

Once I have had an opportunity to fully consider the report, I will bring a series of recommendations to the Executive, for their consideration.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's efforts to prevent and mitigate against the threat of flooding along the Moyola River in Mid Ulster.

(AQO 832/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has made significant progress on the 'Moyola Flood Defence Rehabilitation Scheme' since early 2019. This scheme includes the removal of channel silt and aquatic weed growth and the upgrade of existing flood defences.

Phase one of these works, which is approximately 40% of the overall scheme, has already been completed. A contractor is due to commence works on phase 2 of this scheme in October 2020. It is anticipated that all works will be completed by March 2021.

I understand my officials met with you and local residents on 24 September 2020 to discuss your concerns regarding the Moyola River. My officials gave a commitment to carry out an investigation into potentially increasing the conveyance flow through Fort William Bridge on this River. In addition, my officials also gave a commitment to carry out some additional watercourse maintenance at Fort William Bridge.

Department of Justice

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what is the prisoner capacity of HMP Magilligan.
(AQW 7339/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The normal prisoner capacity of HMP Magilligan is 440, however in the context of the current pandemic the capacity has been reduced to 403 single cell accommodation to support social distancing.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how much funding has been provided to Transgender NI in each of the last 3 years.
(AQW 7369/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice paid Transgender NI a total of £900 in November 2019 for the provision of two training courses. No other funding has been provided by the Department to Transgender NI during the last 3 years.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many prisoners with diagnosed mental health issues have been committed to Care and Supervision Units (CSUs) within the Northern Ireland Prison Service, each year for the last five years; and (ii) for a breakdown of the figures by time spent in a CSU and percentage share of prisoners transferred to a secure Mental Health unit after being accommodated in a CSU.

(AQW 7384/17-22)

Mrs Long: Healthcare services, including mental health services, are provided to prisoners in Northern Ireland through the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (the Trust).

Mental Health teams are in place at each establishment, staffed by the Trust, and are comprised of mental health nurses, psychiatrists, mental health occupational therapists and clinical psychologists.

The diagnosis of mental illness and mental health conditions for any individual is held confidentially by the Trust. The transfer of a prisoner to a secure to a secure Mental Health Unit is managed by the Trust.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service does not hold, nor have access to, the information to answer this question. I suggest that the question is directed to the Department of Health.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoners are currently in prison for terrorist offences, broken down by (i) Republican; and (ii) Loyalist status.
(AQW 7403/17-22)

Mrs Long: As of 30 September 2020 there are a total of 18 individuals in custody having received sentences for scheduled terrorism offences. Of these, 6 are in Republican separated accommodation and 5 are in Loyalist separated accommodation. The remaining 7 are in the general prison population.

There are also 11 individuals remanded in custody having been charged with terrorist related offences. Of these, 10 are in Republican separated accommodation. The other individual is in the general prison population.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what is the prisoner capacity of HMP Maghaberry.
(AQW 7405/17-22)

Mrs Long: The current prisoner capacity of HMP Maghaberry is 1288. Due to appropriate Covid-19 precautions, HMP Maghaberry has increased the residential 'footprint' into areas previously planned for closure.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how much has been paid to Transgender NI to provide training within her Department in each of the last three years.
(AQW 7457/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice paid Transgender NI a total of £900 in November 2019 for the provision of two training courses. No other payments have made to Transgender NI by the Department during the last 3 years.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoner escape attempts there have been in the last five years.
(AQW 7498/17-22)

Mrs Long: There have been no escapes from any Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) establishment in the past five years.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many threats have been made to prison officers over the last five year period.
(AQW 7499/17-22)

Mrs Long: The PSNI has advised the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) of specific threats to 17 individually named prison officers in the past 5 years. There has also been advice of a direct threat to one retired officer in this period and in 2016 a serving prisoner officer, Adrian Ismay, was tragically murdered.

It is also possible that individuals may have received information directly from the PSNI of which NIPS does not have a record.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many; and (ii) what types of drugs have been discovered in prisons over the last five years.
(AQW 7500/17-22)

Mrs Long: Please see tables below to show drugs/tablets recovered for each establishment for 2015 to 2019.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Maghaberry	131	237	215	223	253
Magilligan	64	60	84	71	41
Hydebank	53	20	16	19	159

Types of drugs found are have been both illegal and prescription medication.

Illegal drugs – Cannabis, Cocaine, Amphetamines, MDMA, Xanax

Prescription medication – Pregabalin, Gabapentin, Opiates, Benzodiazapines, Fentanyl, Tramadol, Buprenorphine.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoners have absconded after going on day release, over the last five years.
(AQW 7501/17-22)

Mrs Long: The number of prisoners absconding after a period of temporary release are outlined in the table below for the period 2015 to 2019.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Number of prisoners absconding after a period of temporary release ¹	18	12	17	17	6

Source: Prison Record and Information System (PRISM)

1 These figures relate to the number of prisoners unlawfully at large for one day or more following a period of temporary release

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many; and (ii) what types of weapons have been discovered in prisons over the last five year period.
(AQW 7502/17-22)

Mrs Long: The table below records the numbers of weapons Northern Ireland Prison (NIPS) records indicate were found in prisons during the previous 5 years.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of weapons discovered in NIPS establishments	40	33	45	22	24

NIPS do not categorise weapons by type however in the majority of cases these are make-shift weapons improvised from material available in prisons.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Justice whether she will commit to ensuring that any funding used for equality training is only offered to organisations that respect and support the role of the PSNI in upholding the rule of law.
(AQW 7515/17-22)

Mrs Long: Equality training for staff in the Department of Justice is largely provided through the NICS Centre for Applied Learning. Any specialist or bespoke training is procured in line with public procurement policy and procedures.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of outstanding applications for (i) firearms licences in the Department; and (ii) a removal of a prohibition on acquiring firearms and ammunition.

(AQW 7537/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) My Department is not responsible for processing applications for a firearms licence and does not hold this information, applications are made to the Chief Constable for the grant of a firearm certificate under Article 4 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. If the application is refused under Article 5 of the 2004 Order, the applicant can appeal the Chief Constable's decision to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order. If a firearm certificate is revoked by the Chief Constable under Article 9 of the 2004 Order, an appeal can be made to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order.

In the last five years, 152 decisions have been taken which includes 86 appeal applications received prior to 2016, 14 decisions have been taken in the last seven months. There are currently 90 appeal applications to be processed for consideration, this includes 19 received since April 2020.

- (ii) For a person prohibited from purchasing, acquiring or having a firearm or ammunition in their possession they can apply to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for the removal of that prohibition. Those applications which do not involve a national security aspect are referred to the Department of Justice for me to make a decision. Decisions to remove a prohibition can only be taken by the Minister of Justice and I have taken 16 decisions in the last seven months, there are 15 applications for the removal of a prohibition awaiting a decision.

As I am sure you will appreciate, we have been dealing with a range of immediate and emerging priorities. A number of decisions have been made and we are striving to progress the outstanding appeals and prohibitions in the prevailing context.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice when the backlog in outstanding applications for firearms licences will be cleared.

(AQW 7538/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department does not process applications for firearms licences and does not hold this information, applications are made to the Chief Constable for the grant of a firearm certificate under Article 4 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. If the application is refused under Article 5 of the 2004 Order, the applicant can appeal the Chief Constable's decision to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order. If a firearm certificate is revoked by the Chief Constable under Article 9 of the 2004 Order, an appeal can be made to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order.

In the last five years, 152 appeal decisions have been taken which includes 86 applications received prior to 2016. There was a period of almost two years when no appeal decisions could be taken. There are currently 90 appeal applications to be processed for consideration, this includes 19 received since April 2020.

Each case is different and all cases require careful consideration. As I am sure you will appreciate, we have been dealing with a range of immediate and emerging priorities over the last number of months in the context of Covid-19. We have made a number of recent decisions on appeals and are striving to progress the outstanding cases in the context of a range of pressing priorities.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what is the average time taken by her Department to process applications for (i) firearms licences; and (ii) a removal of a prohibition on acquiring firearms and ammunition.

(AQW 7539/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) My Department does not process applications for firearms licences and does not therefore hold this information, applications are made to the Chief Constable for the grant of a firearm certificate under Article 4 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. If the application is refused under Article 5 of the 2004 Order, the applicant can appeal the Chief Constable's decision to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order. If a firearm certificate is revoked by the Chief Constable under Article 9 of the 2004 Order, an appeal can be made to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order.

As there was a period of almost two years when no appeal decisions could be taken, this distorts the average time taken from the point at which applications were received. Decisions have been taken on 14 appeals in the last seven months.

- (ii) For a person prohibited from purchasing, acquiring or having a firearm or ammunition in their possession they can apply to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for the removal of that prohibition. Those applications which do not involve national security are referred to the Justice Minister to make a decision. As there was a period of almost three

years when no decisions could be taken, this distorts the average time taken from the point at which applications were received. I have taken 16 decisions in the last seven months on the removal of a prohibition.

The department has therefore processed 30 cases of appeals and/or prohibitions in the last seven months. As I am sure you will appreciate, we have also been dealing with a range of immediate and emerging priorities during that time and in that context have continued to progress outstanding appeals and prohibitions.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made on the business case submitted by the PSNI regarding the uplift in the number of officers as per New Decade, New Approach, including the next stage of the process the completion date.

(AQW 7542/17-22)

Mrs Long: One of the priorities within the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) document was to increase police officer numbers to 7,500 officers.

The PSNI submitted a Strategic Outline Case (SOC) on police officer numbers, which is subject to approval processes; this is currently being considered before approval is granted to allow PSNI to proceed to the next stage where they will develop and submit an Outline Business Case (OBC). DoJ are currently engaging with the PSNI and the Department of Finance on the SOC.

Discussions with PSNI will include ongoing requirements and operational considerations which are a matter for the Chief Constable. Any decisions will take into consideration the funding available; at this stage, the total funding envelope available to the Executive for 2021-22 and beyond is not yet known.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Justice what she is doing to support victims of abuse, in light of increasing incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 7549/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am fully aware of the detrimental impact Covid-19 is having on victims of domestic abuse and their greater vulnerability during this period. I remain committed to ensuring that the most vulnerable have access to services and are aware of the support and help that is available.

Earlier this year I re-launched my Department's 'See the Signs' campaign, raising awareness of the issue of domestic abuse and promoting information on the 24 hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline, as well as encouraging people to report to the police. Other organisations have similarly undertaken social media campaigns to promote the important message that help remains available.

My Department has been working with statutory and voluntary sector partners on a multi-agency basis to ensure a joined up response for those who are vulnerable at this time and require protection. For the Department of Justice this included extra funding to facilitate remote working for the 24 hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline, which continues to provide much needed support, advice and practical help (such as referral to accommodation) for those needing to leave their homes. Free public travel has also been made available since the start of July for those going to a refuge or emergency accommodation in collaboration with Minister Mallon and the Department for Infrastructure. Guidance has been published on the Department of Justice website so that people can easily access, in one place, the contact details for a range of support organisations.

In addition, a cross Departmental action plan strategy published at the start of the summer sets out a range of work being taken forward across the Executive to tackle domestic abuse. For my Department this includes work to introduce a new domestic abuse offence, progressing work on a new advocacy support service for victims of domestic and sexual abuse, continuing to pilot behavioural change programmes for those that are demonstrating concerning behaviour as well as plans to introduce Domestic Homicide Reviews by the end of the year.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what is the current number of prisoners held at Hydebank Wood College and Women's Prison.

(AQW 7581/17-22)

Mrs Long: On Friday 2nd October 2020 Hydebank Wood Secure College and Women's Prison had a total population of 118. This is broken down as 64 males and 54 women.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what is the prisoner capacity of Hydebank Wood College and Women's Prison.

(AQW 7582/17-22)

Mrs Long: The normal prisoner capacity of Hydebank Wood Secure College and Women's Prison is 313.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoners that have been out on licence have gone on to reoffend, over the last five years.

(AQW 7583/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is outlined in the table below.

One-Year Proven Reoffending Rate for Prisoners Released on License, 2012/13-2016/17

Cohort	Number of Prisoners Released on License	Number who Reoffended within One Year	Reoffending Rate
2012/13	462	146	31.6%
2013/14	538	164	30.5%
2014/15	605	132	21.8%
2015/16	531	108	20.3%
2016/17	450	115	25.6%

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to individuals who have been released from custody on license during the given financial year. The following disposal types have been used to establish those released on license; life licenses, indeterminate custodial sentences, extended custodial sentences, determinate custodial sentences and Article 26 Licenses (issued under Article 26 of the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 1996).
- 2 The observation period for reoffending is one year and an additional follow up period of six months is given for an offence to be proven in court. This is measured from date of release from custody.
- 3 An offence is counted as a reoffence if it (i) occurs within the one year observation period, (ii) has been committed within Northern Ireland, (iii) is prosecuted via the PSNI and not a third party (e.g. DfC), (iv) is not a breach offence; and (v) has been 'proven', meaning that a court conviction or diversionary disposal has been imposed within the observation year or 6 month follow up period.
- 4 There may be a small number of cases where the reoffence did not occur within the license period (i.e. if the license period is less than 12 months), however, it should be noted that approximately 70% of reoffences occur within the six months following release from custody.
- 5 As there are differences in the offending related characteristics of those included within each cohort, when comparing trends, care should be taken to understand the wider context within which offending and reoffending has occurred.
- 6 Figures relating to reoffending for the 2017/18 cohort will be available in November 2020.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoners are currently out on licence.
(AQW 7584/17-22)

Mrs Long: There are currently 731 individuals on licence in the community.

This figure does not include those individuals released under the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. This information is held by the Northern Ireland Office.

This figure does not include those life licensees who no longer have a supervision element to their licence.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many female prisoners are currently in prison for terrorist offences, broken down by (i) Republican; and (ii) Loyalist status.
(AQW 7585/17-22)

Mrs Long: As of 30 September 2020 there is one female prisoner in custody who has been convicted of scheduled terrorism offences. She is housed in Republican separated accommodation.

A further 2 females are on remand having been charged with terrorism related offences. Both of these individuals are housed in Republican separated accommodation.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what is the oldest application in her Department for a (i) firearm licence; and (ii) removal of a prohibition on acquiring firearms and ammunition, which has not been resolved.
(AQW 7628/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) My Department does not process applications for a firearms licence and does not hold this information, applications are made to the Chief Constable for the grant of a firearm certificate under Article 4 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. If the application is refused under Article 5 of the 2004 Order, the applicant can appeal the Chief Constable's decision to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order. If a firearm certificate is revoked by the Chief Constable under Article 9 of the 2004 Order, an appeal can be made to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order.

There are currently two firearm appeal applications where the appeal was received by the Department in 2015 both of which are dependent on updates from external processes before a decision can be made.

- (ii) The removal of prohibitions can only be determined by either the Secretary of State where there are national security implications, or, in all other cases, the Minister of Justice. The oldest application for the removal of a statutory prohibition which has yet to be decided was received in the Department on 27 April 2018. I have taken decisions on 16 prohibition cases in seven months and will be determining applications, as far as possible, in date order and in the context of a range of pressing priorities.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice how many appeal applications for the renewal of firearm licenses her Department has received in the past 5 years, broken down by year.
(AQW 7678/17-22)

Mrs Long: The term 'renewal' is not used for firearm applications or firearm appeals. Under the Firearms (NI) Order 2004 automatic renewals are not permitted. All applications for continued possession of firearms will be subject to a further grant process. Applications are made to the Chief Constable for the grant of a firearm certificate under Article 4 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. If the application is refused under Article 5 of the 2004 Order, the applicant can appeal the Chief Constable's decision to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order. If a firearm certificate is revoked by the Chief Constable under Article 9 of the 2004 Order, an appeal can be made to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order.

The following table shows all appeal applications against the Chief Constable's decision to refuse to grant a firearm certificate or revoke a firearm certificate received by the Department in the past 5 years:

Year	Appeal Applications Received	No. of Applications for Decision
2020	26 3 late appeals not accepted	23
2019	37 4 late appeals not accepted 7 withdrawn by the appellant	26
2018	26 5 late appeals not accepted 3 withdrawn by the appellant	18
2017	39 3 late appeals not accepted 5 withdrawn by the appellant 1 no right of appeal	30
2016	69 5 late appeals not accepted 7 withdrawn by the appellant 1 no right of appeal	56
Total		153

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice how many appeal applications for the renewal of firearm licenses her Department has issued a determination on in the past 5 years, broken down by year.
(AQW 7679/17-22)

Mrs Long: The term 'renewal' is not used for firearm applications or firearm appeals. Under the Firearms (NI) Order 2004 automatic renewals are not permitted. All applications for continued possession of firearms will be subject to a further grant process. Applications are made to the Chief Constable for the grant of a firearm certificate under Article 4 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. If the application is refused under Article 5 of the 2004 Order, the applicant can appeal the Chief Constable's decision to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order. If a firearm certificate is revoked by the Chief Constable under Article 9 of the 2004 Order, an appeal can be made to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order.

In the last five years, 152 decisions on appeals have been taken which includes 86 applications received prior to 2016. There are currently 90 appeal applications to be processed for consideration, 19 of which were received since April 2020.

The following table shows the number of appeal decisions made by the Department in the last 5 years:

Year	No. of Appeal Applications Decisions made
2020	14

Year	No. of Appeal Applications Decisions made
2019 ¹	21
2018 ¹	2
2017 ²	12
2016	103
Total	152

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice how many appeal applications for the renewal of firearm licenses have been in her Department in excess of 5 years, still awaiting a determination.

(AQW 7680/17-22)

Mrs Long: The term 'renewal' is not used for firearm applications or firearm appeals. Under the Firearms (NI) Order 2004 automatic renewals are not permitted. All applications for continued possession of firearms will be subject to a further grant process. Applications are made to the Chief Constable for the grant of a firearm certificate under Article 4 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. If the application is refused under Article 5 of the 2004 Order, the applicant can appeal the Chief Constable's decision to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order. If a firearm certificate is revoked by the Chief Constable under Article 9 of the 2004 Order, an appeal can be made to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of that Order.

The Department has received 153 appeal applications against the Chief Constable's decision to refuse to grant a firearm certificate or revoke a firearm certificate in the last five years.

There are currently two firearm appeal applications where the appeal was received by the Department over 5 years ago, both of which are dependent on updates from external processes before a decision can be made.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice (i) for an update of her review into the Personal Injury Discount Rate; and (ii) when a new rate will be set.

(AQW 7705/17-22)

Mrs Long: Owing to a conflict of interest arising from my husband's membership of a medical defence union, I have delegated key decisions in relation to the personal injury discount rate to my Permanent Secretary. The responses of the statutory consultees are presently being considered and I expect the outcome of the review to be communicated to stakeholders by the end of October.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail how Operation Nexus is operating in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7753/17-22)

Mrs Long: As the Member will be aware, immigration is an excepted matter but I can advise that Operation Nexus is an ongoing national operation to share information between Home Office Immigration Enforcement and UK Police forces, which includes the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Its purpose is to monitor foreign national offenders who are deemed either persistent or high-harm offenders, in order for appropriate action to be taken. Immigration Enforcement's Criminal Casework Directorate (CCD) also works closely with the NI Prison Service to deal with foreign national offenders.

Information sharing agreements such as those that exist under Operation Nexus between Immigration Enforcement and PSNI and separate work with the Northern Ireland Prison Service, are vital in supporting and enabling Organised Crime Task Force partners to work collaboratively to disrupt organised crime.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice whether the illegal drug dealing Infrastructure operating within Great Britain and referred to as county lines is in operation or emerging in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7842/17-22)

Mrs Long: 'County lines' is a term used to describe criminal networks in large cities and urban areas involved in the supply and sale of drugs to rural areas, as well as market and coastal towns, by using dedicated mobile phone lines or "deal lines".

These criminals exploit children and vulnerable people to move drugs and money. Once involved in county lines, exploited individuals are at risk of extreme physical and /or sexual violence, gang recriminations and trafficking.

The PSNI has not yet seen this modus operandi within Northern Ireland. It is possible that the geography of the Northern Ireland does not lend itself to this type of infrastructure. However, PSNI liaise with the NCA's National County Lines Co-ordination Centre (NCLCC) in order to monitor emerging issues and trends.

While the county lines infrastructure is not seen within Northern Ireland our environment presents much greater emphasis for those involved in the drug trade on transporting drugs across the Irish Sea and the land border. There are organised criminal groups involved in the importation and supply of illicit drugs locally. These groups are the focus of police investigations in partnership with other law enforcement agencies including the National Crime Agency (NCA) and Border Force.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice whether a question regarding domestic abuse could be inserted into the Prisoner Needs Profile for women who are in custody.

(AQW 7853/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Prisoner Needs Profile (PNP) is currently being reviewed with the assistance of partners across a number of sectors. The revised profile will include two additional sections, with a range of questions regarding supporting those in the care of the Northern Ireland Prison Service who have been abused, raped, or experienced domestic violence, and those who have been involved in prostitution and the sex industry. The revised PNP is scheduled to go live, following testing, in January 2021.

As mentioned previously (AQW 6800/17-22 refers) there is a range of opportunities for women to disclose domestic abuse and receive support, this includes when they enter the custody of the Northern Ireland Prison Service. A needs assessment is conducted on entry and is reviewed during their custodial sentence. In the event of such a disclosure, support is available through a women safety worker and supplementary support through partners such as Women's Aid and NexusNI. Due to restrictions related to Covid-19, engagement with external partners is currently provided via telephone.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice for an update on (i) the Laganside Magistrates Court Domestic Violence pilot; and (ii) specialist listing arrangements for domestic assault cases.

(AQW 7855/17-22)

Mrs Long: Work is ongoing with the judiciary around the piloting of listing arrangements at Laganside magistrates' court, which would enable the clustering of domestic assault cases. The work on the listing pilot has been accompanied by consideration of how to improve file quality processes, including earlier sharing of information; and consideration of appropriate support for victims. The intention is that this will support prosecutions to proceed, potentially in the absence of a victim giving evidence. My Department will want to give further consideration to this matter following the pilot, in terms of the approach to be adopted around the listing of domestic abuse cases. We will also want to consider the experience of the listing arrangements for domestic abuse cases which are currently operating at Londonderry magistrates' court.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice (i) for her assessment of 200 jurors having to travel from the Derry City and Strabane District Council area to Coleraine for jury duty when COVID-19 case numbers are currently sitting at over 200 per 100,000; and (ii) for her assessment of whether jury trials for Derry Courthouse taking place in Coleraine Courthouse should be suspended.

(AQW 7864/17-22)

Mrs Long: The layout of the Bishop Street Courthouse means it is unable to accommodate 12 jurors safely with social distancing, consequently Crown Court trials have been moved to Coleraine at this time.

To facilitate COVID-19 secure jury trials, significant work has been undertaken to make sure court buildings are kept safe, secure and clean and that social distancing occurs in line with the HSC Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance.

Jury Service is a legislative requirement governed by The Juries (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, it is a civic duty placed on members of the community and is an essential part of the justice process. It should be noted that exemptions apply to this process.

Jurors may also apply for an excusal or a deferral from Jury Service for reasons such as illness. This is particularly relevant at this time when many of those eligible for Jury Service may be shielding. Consequently many of those called for jury duty will be excused prior to having to physically attend court. This was the case in the example cited, where only 27 of those 200 individuals were required to travel to Coleraine Courthouse.

Those called for Jury Service are provided with guidance, in line with that provided by PHA, not to attend should they have COVID-19 symptoms or if they have been advised to self-isolate. The guidance includes a detailed information checklist on how to remain safe when attending court. Further information is available on the Department of Justice website at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/articles/jury-panel-information>.

The programme of work to incrementally recover court business is being informed by Public Health Guidance. These arrangements will be kept under review and will be revisited as circumstances develop. It is crucial, however, that every effort is made to allow jury trials to proceed where possible as they represent some of the most serious and sensitive cases in the system. Long delays in such cases can have a significant negative impacts on victims, witnesses and defendants as well as on confidence in the justice system.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Justice to provide a timescale for the delivery of the Northern Ireland Troubles-related incident Victims Payments Scheme.

(AQW 7897/17-22)

Mrs Long: Work is actively ongoing within my Department in conjunction with other stakeholders to implement the Victims' Payments Scheme. That includes appointment of an IT provider to develop a system to support administration of the Scheme and engagement with the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission to progress appointment of members to the Victims' Payments Board. The aim is for the scheme to open for applications in early March, although the important issue of longer-term funding for the scheme remains outstanding.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the deaths of two prisoners in the space of ten days at Maghaberry Prison; and to provide her assessment of the adequacy of current staffing levels.

(AQW 8134/17-22)

Mrs Long: A person in custody at Maghaberry was found unresponsive in his cell on the 18 September 2020 and was pronounced dead a short time later by paramedics. A further death occurred in Maghaberry on 28 September 2020.

I am conscious that at the centre of this are two grieving families and I would like to extend my sympathy to the families. As with protocol both deaths were immediately reported to the PSNI, the Coroner and the Prisoner Ombudsman and are now subject to investigation.

Regarding the separate issue of my assessment of current staffing levels at Maghaberry, both the Governor of Maghaberry Prison and the Director General have confirmed that they have the resources they require to safely manage the current prisoner population.

I am content that the Prison Service will continue to do everything it can to keep prisoners safe; however, we should not underestimate the challenge of supporting and supervising almost 1,500 individuals, many of whom are vulnerable, challenging and with complex needs, within our prisons 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Justice what discussions she has had with her UK counterparts to consider the need for changes to legislation to address malicious social media harassment of journalists, politicians and members of the public.

(AQO 838/17-22)

Mrs Long: Telecommunications legislation is a reserved matter but many of the harms covered in the Government White Paper on Online Harms relate to devolved matters.

I took the opportunity to raise this issue during my recent meeting with Priti Patel earlier this month. I also wrote to the Home Secretary, following our meeting, to highlight the considerable concern in Northern Ireland regarding the use of unverified and anonymous online social media accounts in enabling bullying and intimidation, including of elected representatives, and the lack of cooperation with justice partners who seek to prosecute the most serious cases.

At our meeting the Home Secretary expressed her commitment to working closely with us on this issue and agreed to provide regular updates on the work her department is taking forward and ensuring it provides the best basis for us in Northern Ireland, to address this difficult issue.

I, along with many Assembly colleagues, are well aware of the impact that malicious social media can have on an individual. It is totally unacceptable that some people can hide behind a device and continually abuse and cause harm to others without accountability. There must be safeguards in place to ensure that those people who are intent on causing harm online are prevented from doing so and critically that we can protect all those who are vulnerable. I am fully committed to playing my part in addressing this issue where I can.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Troubles-related incident Victims Payments Scheme.

(AQO 839/17-22)

Mrs Long: Work is actively ongoing within my Department in conjunction with other stakeholders to implement the Victim's Payments Scheme. That includes appointment of an IT provider to commence development of a system to support administration of the Scheme, ongoing work with the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission to progress appointments to the Victims' Payments Board and exploratory work to identify suitable accommodation for the Victims' Payments Board and the administration team.

Although there are a number of important steps that need to be taken to ensure the scheme can open for applications in early March 2021, the important issue of longer term funding for the scheme remains outstanding. I am strongly of the view that the UK Government has an obligation to make the necessary funding available. In that context, I met with the First Minister, deputy First Minister and Finance Minister recently to discuss the need to identify longer-term funding and a joint-meeting is being arranged with the Secretary of State.

The Victims' Payments Regulations 2020 provide for an applicant's degree of disablement to be assessed by a health care professional. The Victims' Payments Board is responsible for arranging for applicants to be assessed by a health care professional with the appropriate experience and training. Officials are working with colleagues in the Executive Office to design and develop a medical assessment methodology.

Guidance published by the Secretary of State for the Victims' Payments Board states that anyone who has a conviction - terrorist or otherwise - which caused serious harm to anyone else, should ordinarily not receive a payment. I am concerned, however, that alongside publication of the guidance, the Secretary of State suggested that he would reserve the power to intervene in some decisions made by the Victims' Payments Board.

It is critical that the Board is not subject to any external interference and that it can carry out its work independently. Any external intervention has the potential to undermine the operation of the Board and those arrangements are clearly set out in Regulations. I have written to the Secretary of State seeking clarification on his intentions.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice to outline the current programmes and support her Department provides local communities to combat the use of illegal drugs.

(AQO 840/17-22)

Mrs Long: Like many issues related to harm and vulnerability, no one Department working alone is able to solve a complex and long-standing issues such as drug abuse. We all recognise that this issue has a strong public health element to it. However, Justice of course plays an important role, and my Department adopts a collaborative response and work closely with partners to deliver a range of programmes which aim to reduce the use of and harms of illegal drugs in families and the wider community.

Prevention and early intervention are vital in combating illegal drug use. Some programmes that my department delivers include prevention messages and initiatives in post primary schools to raise awareness of harms associated with drug use, and support for young people and their families referred to youth justice services (YJA).

Under our problem-solving justice approach my Department has developed Substance Misuse Courts, Support Hubs, Enhanced Combination Orders, piloted a Family Drug and Alcohol Court and are undertaking a scoping study of a Mental Health Court.

In terms of enforcement, the Executive Action Plan to Tackle Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime is supporting a number of projects to address the harm caused to communities by paramilitary organisations, and the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF) is a specific resource focused on tackling the criminality associated with paramilitary groups, including the supply of drugs.

Our work with our partners in the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) is focussed on the disruption of organised crime gangs involved in the supply of illicit drugs and the delivery of effective enforcement action.

At a community level the Department of Justice funds Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, who have the expertise and knowledge to tackle the drug related issues which are of most concern to local communities.

Finally, while justice has a key role in addressing use of illegal drugs, the Executive has recognised that a collaborative approach involving health, safeguarding, education, justice, employment and housing is required to address the wider determinants of problematic substance use.

The Department of Health are leading the development of a new cross-sectoral Executive Strategy to tackle substance use and my officials are key partners in a multi-agency group who are taking this work forward.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Justice what steps she will take to protect the independence of the Troubles-related incident Victims Payment Scheme to ensure it remains free from political interference.

(AQO 841/17-22)

Mrs Long: Work is actively ongoing within my Department in conjunction with other stakeholders to implement the Victim's Payments Scheme. That includes appointment of an IT provider to commence development of a system to support administration of the Scheme, ongoing work with the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission to progress appointments to the Victims' Payments Board and exploratory work to identify suitable accommodation for the Victims' Payments Board and the administration team.

Although there are a number of important steps that need to be taken to ensure the scheme can open for applications in early March 2021, the important issue of longer term funding for the scheme remains outstanding. I am strongly of the view that the UK Government has an obligation to make the necessary funding available. In that context, I met with the First Minister, deputy First Minister and Finance Minister recently to discuss the need to identify longer-term funding and a joint-meeting is being arranged with the Secretary of State.

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Guidance published by the Secretary of State for the Victims' Payments Board states that anyone who has a conviction - terrorist or otherwise - which caused serious harm to anyone else, should ordinarily not receive a payment. I am concerned, however, that alongside publication of the guidance, the Secretary of State suggested that he would reserve the power to intervene in some decisions made by the Victims' Payments Board.

It is critical that the Board is not subject to any external interference and that it can carry out its work independently. Any external intervention has the potential to undermine the operation of the Board and those arrangements are clearly set out in Regulations. I have written to the Secretary of State seeking clarification on his intentions.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the challenges her Department will face as a result of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill.

(AQO 843/17-22)

Mrs Long: I have previously expressed my concerns about the Internal Market Bill and any attempt to undermine the Northern Ireland Protocol.

In order to prepare for the end of the transition period in three months' time, we need urgent clarity on how the Protocol will operate. Instead, this Bill adds further uncertainty and threatens the rule of law.

Furthermore, any perceived mistrust of the UK Government's commitment to international obligations may make it harder to secure a comprehensive and effective Future Security Partnership, which is the best route to continued effective co-operation with the EU on justice and security matters.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Justice to outline the medical assessment process for the Troubles-related incident Victims Payments Scheme.

(AQO 844/17-22)

Mrs Long: Work is actively ongoing within my Department in conjunction with other stakeholders to implement the Victim's Payments Scheme. That includes appointment of an IT provider to commence development of a system to support administration of the Scheme, ongoing work with the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission to progress appointments to the Victims' Payments Board and exploratory work to identify suitable accommodation for the Victims' Payments Board and the administration team.

Although there are a number of important steps that need to be taken to ensure the scheme can open for applications in early March 2021, the important issue of longer term funding for the scheme remains outstanding. I am strongly of the view that the UK Government has an obligation to make the necessary funding available. In that context, I met with the First Minister, deputy First Minister and Finance Minister recently to discuss the need to identify longer-term funding and a joint-meeting is being arranged with the Secretary of State.

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Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's work on tackling paramilitarism.

(AQO 845/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department is responsible for co-ordinating the cross Executive Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime. Members will be aware that commitments under this plan are delivered by a range of government departments, and as Justice Minister I am progressing a number of specific actions.

It is vital that we have a robust legislative framework underpinning the criminal justice response to paramilitarism. That is why I am moving ahead with legislation on committal and the commencement of the Criminal Finances Act 2017. I am reviewing the results of a public consultation on organised crime offences, which closed on 2 October. I have also expanded the scope of the unduly lenient sentencing scheme to include hybrid offences linked to terrorism, paramilitary activity and organised crime groups

As members will appreciate, effectively tackling paramilitarism means building capacity across the wider system. As such, my Department supports Policing and Community Safety Partnerships in building community confidence and embedding a culture of lawfulness.

Under the Action Plan, accredited restorative justice organisations have been at the forefront of developing restorative practice, delivering mediation and support services, and prevention and diversionary programmes. They have been engaged in plans to develop a Centre of Restorative Excellence. Furthermore, training and education opportunities are offered to all prisoners currently within the separated regime.

I have also re-established the Political Advisory Group, which I chair. This will ensure that there is political leadership and engagement on improving our communities' resilience to paramilitarism.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on the courts system, whether her Department will publish a Case Processing Time for Criminal Cases dealt with at Courts in Northern Ireland 2020-21 interim report.

(AQO 847/17-22)

Mrs Long: At present, my Department does not have any plans to publish this information in a standalone report, but any information on the impact of COVID-19 on the courts system will be captured in future annual reports. Finalised statistical

reports in relation to case processing time are generally produced 5 – 6 months post the period reported on, to allow for finalisation of records and the validation of data to be completed.

However, statisticians within the Department produce quarterly management information in relation to case processing times to allow regular monitoring.

Department for the Economy

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department intends to explore the creation of eHubs to enable office working in towns and villages.

(AQW 6136/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Local provision of facilities to support economic development tends to be delivered at Council level as part of their economic development remit following the transfer under the Review of Public Administration in 2015.

It is worth noting that such accommodation is already available at a local level across all 11 District Council areas through the network of Local Enterprise Agencies.

The Enterprise Northern Ireland network operates through 28 Local Enterprise agencies with 44 various locations across all eleven Council areas. All locations have serviced office space available on a rental basis. Several Belfast-based organisations have taken small satellite offices to service regionally-based hub activity.

Many locations have co-working and/or hot-desking space available on a desk or micro-pod basis with a small fee payable (per hour or per day). This is already a popular facility with remote workers.

I understand that some of the locations have open/free of charge access meeting spaces with desks/tables and welfare facilities. Enterprise NI have confirmed that all have excellent digital connectivity and have invested in layout design, team training, PPE, sanitisation equipment and Covid-19 awareness signage to ensure safe and secure meeting and working space.

In addition to this, the Local Economic Development Company (LEDCOM) has established a presence in Ballyclare to provide co-working space, a hot desk facility and business incubation services. The opening of this facility has been delayed due to Covid-19 but it is expected to officially open in January 2021.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy who is financially liable for the loss of earnings suffered by (i) small and medium enterprises; (ii) the newly self-employed; and (iii) sole traders due to government instruction to close their business as a response to COVID-19.

(AQW 6163/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Liability is a legal concept and, as such, it falls outwith my remit.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on progress in banning zero hours contracts, as set out in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 6464/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My officials are currently developing policy proposals in relation to the New Decade, New Approach statement on zero hours contracts. I am mindful that any measures must support Northern Ireland's economic recovery as it emerges from lockdown. I will wish to take account of the views of stakeholders on this important issue. Any proposals in relation to zero hours contracts would be subject to public consultation prior to the introduction of any new legislation in the Assembly.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy what applications she made to the Department of Finance for funding to support manufacturing industries with an Net Asset Value above £15,000.

(AQW 6493/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive has provided an unprecedented level of support to businesses since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Business Support Schemes introduced by my Department on behalf of the Executive have provided roughly £340 million of support to over 32,000 businesses. This included 2,150 businesses who received Industrial Derating with a Total Net Annual Value of £15,000 or below.

In addition to the grant schemes, the Department of Finance implemented the business rates relief valued at over £300 million which included a four month rates relief for manufacturing businesses.

Manufacturing industries were also able to avail of national support schemes where they met the eligibility criteria.

It is acknowledged that not all businesses could avail of the support provided by the grant schemes.

As we move beyond the immediate response phase, it is now important that we start the process to rebuild our economy. The Executive has agreed an economic recovery framework to provide the foundation for economic, health and societal renewal.

On 24 September, the Executive allocated funding for a range of initiatives including, amongst others, £8.6m for assistance to business, £8.4m for skills and youth training, £5.8m to university research and development, £1.85m for support for air routes and £1.4m for energy. The allocations will support the work the department is doing to deliver a wide-ranging and comprehensive programme of interventions to rebuild our economy.

Any decision on funding further interventions will require agreement by the Executive. The Minister, and her Executive colleagues, remain committed to collectively agreeing further support measures as soon as possible.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will be seeking to obtain a limited ability to redistribute funds to ensure flexibility on COVID-19 support scheme spending and avoid underspend.

(AQW 6555/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Earlier this year the Executive endorsed the recommendation of the Department of Finance to allow Departments flexibility to reallocate non-ring fenced funding for COVID-19 response measures. My Department took full advantage of this and reallocated £23.7m to fund emerging pressures.

Similar flexibility does not exist with regard to COVID-19 ring-fenced funding.

With respect to the latest COVID-19 Allocation Exercise, which was agreed on 24 September 2020, the categories are ring-fenced. However, the Executive has approved the ability of Departments to exercise flexibility across similar initiatives within the same category. This is helpful to us.

My Department always seeks to fully utilise the funding it receives, and where necessary, facilitate reallocations if it has approval to do so. Its excellent track record in effective budgetary management, which is noted both within its Annual Report and Accounts, and in its annual Business Plan, clearly demonstrates this.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how many first year students have been allocated places in Queen's University Medical School for September 2020; and (ii) when they were notified.

(AQW 6565/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Queen's University Belfast has confirmed that, following my announcement of approval for an additional cohort of 30 for September 2020 entry, 266 non-international students were allocated places in their Medical School. All students were notified by 11 September 2020.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy how much her Department has spent facilitating staff working from home.

(AQW 6779/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Work is on-going with the Department of Finance to finalise the cost of the additional IT equipment provided to facilitate DfE staff working from home.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether the bid of £4 million for heavyweight consumer advertising programmes represents value for money.

(AQW 6792/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland tourism and hospitality industry has been very heavily impacted by COVID-19. I established a Tourism Recovery Steering Group to help chart a path to recovery. This group is supported by a Working Group and a number of Task and Finish Groups, representing all aspects of the tourism and hospitality industry. The collective feedback from the industry is that the £4 million consumer marketing activity is their number one priority in seeking to help with recovery.

In the absence of international visitors, current marketing campaigns to encourage Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland residents to holiday in Northern Ireland must be sustained if we are to stimulate consumer demand into, and through, the autumn and winter months. As the Job Retention Scheme comes to a close, this becomes imperative if tourism and hospitality businesses are to survive.

Statistics gathered by the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation suggest the current tourism campaigns have been very successful, with hotel bookings from the Republic of Ireland in August having risen by 200% compared to the same period last year, whilst bookings from Northern Ireland residents have increased by 74%.

However, to continue to stimulate such consumer demand, Northern Ireland has to compete for a "share of voice" on marketing channels. I am content that the £4 million proposed is a reasonable sum, especially in light of the competitive market. Should this bid for funding be successful, the value for money of the proposal will be tested through the normal business case process to ensure the funding is used to best effect. The £4 million proposed in the bid will allow the current successful campaign activity levels to be sustained until the end of the financial year. The bid will also directly support businesses in the form of a 75% marketing grant to subsidise their own marketing activity.

If we fail to secure an adequate share of the Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland markets, many businesses will close and thousands of jobs will be lost.

Over recent years, the Northern Ireland Executive has invested significantly in building its tourism infrastructure and in major events to promote Northern Ireland as a tourism destination, making tourism a cornerstone of our economy, whilst contributing to many of the outcomes of the Programme for Government. This marketing expenditure is essential to ensure that the benefits of that investment can be realised and jobs right across Northern Ireland retained.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has directed her departmental officials to make any changes to their work-streams as a result of the publication of the Internal Market Bill by the British government.

(AQW 6793/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am now considering the detail of the Bill and I will be seeking further engagement with UK Government Ministers on its contents, alongside Executive colleagues, in the coming weeks.

All of my assessments of the Bill will be framed by the commitments the UK Government has made to give our businesses unfettered access to the GB market, and to protect NI's place in the UK internal market.

No departmental restructuring has occurred as a result of the publication of the Bill.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 6032, to detail who the agreement to temporarily close HMS Caroline was with.

(AQW 6829/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Due to the Covid-19 crisis the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) closed HMS Caroline (HMSC) to the public on 17th March 2020. After consultation with NMRN and the Heritage Lottery Fund Northern Ireland (HLF), I decided to extend this period of temporary closure to 31st December 2020.

There were several reasons for extending the closure and these included the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the local tourism sector, disappointing visitor numbers, substantial deficits being accumulated by the attraction and refusal of NMRN to sign a new operating agreement without a new financial model being put into place. My Department had requested an extension to this Agreement but NMRN took the decision not to renew this unless we would agree a new funding model which absolved them of financial risk. NMRN confirmed its intention to my Department on 10th June 2020 and this did not afford officials sufficient time to formulate a new funding model, redraft a new operating agreement or to procure a new operator of the attraction. Therefore, following discussions with NMRN and HLF, I decided that the attraction will remain closed until 31st December 2020. The NMRN agreed to continue to repair, maintain and oversee the attraction during this period of temporary closure and the Department agreed to reimburse the NMRN for providing this service.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy how Northern Ireland will be impacted by the new UK-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement.

(AQW 6856/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The new UK-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement has been agreed in principle and is due to be formally signed in the coming weeks. However, it is expected that, when finalised, it will be largely based on the existing EU Japan agreement. This will provide much need certainty and continuity for our local industry during these challenging economic times.

There are some areas that go beyond the existing EU Japan agreement which are expected to benefit UK manufacturers, food and drink producers and the tech sector in particular. These include:

- tariff reductions for pork and beef exports;
- protection for local brands such as Irish poteen, Armagh bramley apples, Lough Neagh eels and Lough Neagh pollan;
- protection for the digital sector;
- improved market access for financial services; and
- improved mobility for business people.

As preparations are made for the operation of the new agreement I will be seeking to ensure it enables our trading relationship with Japan can further blossom.

A full Impact Assessment will be published by the UK Government before the agreement comes into effect. It is expected that this will include regional impacts including those for Northern Ireland.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for the Economy, given the importance of HMS Caroline to events in 2021 commemorating the creation of Northern Ireland, whether she can guarantee that HMS Caroline will open on 1 January 2021 in light of her decision to close it as visitor attraction from 1 July to 31 December.

(AQW 6903/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: HMS Caroline (HMSC) has played a very important part in our maritime history and I fully recognise the cultural importance of the attraction to Northern Ireland. I remain committed to exploring all options to enable this important heritage visitor attraction to remain in Belfast.

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) closed HMSC to the public on 17th March 2020. After consultation with NMRN, I extended this period of temporary closure to 31st December 2020. There were several reasons for extending the closure and these included the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the local tourism sector, disappointing visitor numbers, substantial deficits being accumulated by the attraction and the decision by NMRN not to sign a new operating agreement without a new financial model being put into place.

Since this decision, my officials have been working to identify the full range of options for the long term future of the attraction. Consultants have been appointed to identify all potential delivery models and options that support the retention of the Ship in Belfast and to make value for money recommendations on these. They have already undertaken an extensive series of discussions with the relevant stakeholders and have begun to shortlist potential options.

I am cognisant of the need for a prompt decision on the future of HMSC in Belfast and aim to have a clear plan for its future agreed before the end of the temporary closure period on 31st December 2020.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy what tariffs were paid to (i) Domestic; and (ii) Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive scheme participants since 2014.

(AQW 7015/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The tariffs for the Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Scheme are available at the links below:

- Tariffs applicable from the start of the Scheme until 2019/20 are available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Domestic-Annual-Report-RHI-Scheme-Analysis.pdf>
- Tariffs applicable to the current year (2020/21) are available at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/renewable-heat-incentive-domestic-customers>

The tariffs for the Non Domestic RHI Scheme are available at the links below:

- Tariffs applicable from the launch of the Scheme until 2019/20 are available at
- <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/statutory-information-non-domestic-rhi-analysis.pdf>
- Tariffs applicable to the current year (2020/21) are available at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/renewable-heat-incentive-non-domestic-customers>

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for an update on the current status of the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme; (ii) to confirm whether she intends to close the current scheme; (iii) what plans she has to review the conditions of the current scheme; and (iv) to confirm whether she has any plans to create a new scheme.

(AQW 7020/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) I am currently considering options on the future of the Scheme. There are a series of complex issues under consideration including Value for Money matters, compliance with State aid rules and the impacts on Scheme participants.
- (ii) I will discuss options with Executive Colleagues before any final decision in relation to the closure of the Scheme is taken.
- (iii) My Department has commissioned several pieces of independent research in recent years in relation to the Non Domestic RHI Scheme, including a review of the biomass tariff structure by Ricardo Energy and Environment in 2018, research into hardship by Buglass Energy Advisory, and a further tariff review by Cornwall Insight in 2020. In addition, the scheme is subject to scrutiny by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and by our own Departmental Internal Audit team.
- (iv) The NDNA includes a commitment that the RHI scheme will be “replaced by a scheme that effectively cuts carbon emissions.” The introduction of such a scheme will be subject to consideration and discussion by the Executive in due course. This will be done in line with the new Northern Ireland Energy strategy, as part of an overall framework to support the pathway to net zero carbon.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy what progress reports (i) she has requested of her Department’s racial equality champion since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020; and (ii) her Department’s racial equality champion has provided since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020.

(AQW 7027/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department’s racial equality champion has reported that she has attended all scheduled meetings of the Racial Equality Champions Group and meetings between the Racial Equality Champions and the Racial Equality Sub Group. The most recent meeting took place on 25 August 2020 to discuss the concept of Northern Ireland being declared a racism free zone.

She has led the work on a new strategy for English for Speakers of Other Languages which will issue for consultation later this year. She also provides a verbal update to the Departmental Board on the work of the Racial Equality Champions on a quarterly basis.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy what work her Department has carried out to determine where ethnic monitoring should be introduced.

(AQW 7028/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive Office has responsibility for implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy and has commissioned research into where ethnic monitoring should be introduced. My department will respond in due course to the findings of the research.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy how the Invest NI Innovation Fund has helped in terms of supporting business to manufacture personal protective equipment and perspex screens.

(AQW 7048/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI has offered financial support through Innovation Vouchers and other support mechanisms such as Technical Development Incentive to a number of Northern Ireland businesses to assist in bringing COVID-19 related products and services to market.

These have included products such as face masks, face shields and other PPE, hand sanitisers and other medical device products. Other businesses developing software such as COVID-19 communication platform for GPs, and socially distancing software were also financially assisted.

A call for innovation voucher applications took place during May 2020. The call specifically welcomed applications for projects that might help alleviate COVID-19 related issues faced by businesses.

Over 100 innovation vouchers were awarded and these projects allowed businesses to explore new ideas, technologies and product opportunities, to provide solutions for COVID-19 issues.

Invest NI's Technical Advisory Unity has also advised on complying with associated regulations such as Medical Device directive (ISO 13485 management system), and PPE (Regulation (EU) 2016/425), as well as on NHS and MHRA (Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency) requirements for face masks, shields, scrubs, other PPE, hand sanitisers and related medical devices.

Invest NI Innovation Advisors provided support to companies to share technology to develop Covid-19 response solutions. This included sharing Computer Numerical Control (CNC) files for fabric cutters, technical drawings and designs for masks, visors and cadaver pouches from Manchester Metropolitan University with around 100 individuals in the local textiles sector. They also assisted a printing company to diversify into the development of face shields, with the company now marketing these products.

Invest NI promoted the national Innovate UK "Business-led innovation in response to global disruption" competition providing guidance on the application process and feedback on draft applications. This competition offers up to £50k of upfront grant support for R&D projects lasting up to 6 months. The overall result was that 18 local companies were successful in winning funding from Innovate UK, with a further 48 companies on a reserve list to be potentially funded from The Department for the Economy.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has any remit over the closure of retail banks.
(AQW 7109/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I appreciate the impact that retail banking services can have on local communities, business and investment.

My Department does not have direct responsibility for banks in Northern Ireland as the regulation of financial services is a reserved matter. However, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (CCNI), which is one of my Department's Non Departmental Public Bodies, provides advice on consumer matters including banking services.

The Consumer Council website (www.consumercouncil.org.uk) provides guidance to consumers on bank closures, a Financial Map of Northern Ireland that highlights financial services in areas affected by bank closures, and a current account comparison tool.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy, now that Fibrus has been confirmed as the contractor to deliver Project Stratum, (i) confirm the final budget for the project; (ii) detail how much of the project is construction costs; (iii) detail how much of the project is administration costs; (iv) whether she can confirm when construction will start; and (v) whether she will publish a detailed work programme to identify each stage of the project, by postcode area.

(AQW 7193/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is still in the procurement and governance cycle for this project. Until final approvals have been given, and a formal announcement made, I am unable to respond to any speculation regarding my Department's intent to award a contract for Project Stratum. However when further information becomes available I will make it available.

1 <https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/consumers/rights-and-advice/financial-services/bank-branch-closures>

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to bring forward a Capital Funding Scheme to support Local Enterprise Agencies to (i) acquire land; (ii) construct new buildings.

(AQW 7241/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I recognise the important work that the Local Enterprise Agency network is carrying out, in particular their focus on supporting small enterprises through these difficult times. Given the nature of the NI economy, with the grass roots development of the micro and small businesses that make up a considerable portion of it, the viability of these sectors is important.

Local Enterprise Agencies are typically supported at a local Council level, reflecting the economic development remit that was passed to councils in 2015 following the Review of Public Administration. I therefore have no plans to bring forward a capital funding scheme at a local level, but Invest NI has done some relevant work in this area.

In April 2019 Invest NI launched a Flexible Workspace Scheme offering loans of up to 40% of the total cost of developing new start-up and early stage business accommodation of up to 35,000 sq ft in size. The costs associated with land acquisition were, however, excluded.

The Scheme was developed following an approach from a Local Enterprise Agency seeking support for its expansion plans. An economic appraisal commissioned by Invest NI concluded there was sufficient evidence to support a Northern Ireland wide pilot exercise.

Whilst support for such projects would normally fall within the remit of Councils, Invest NI agreed that it would take the lead with responsibility for any future schemes sitting with each local authority.

By the deadline of 30 August 2019 Invest NI had received a total of 14 expressions of interest including four from Local Enterprise Agencies. Whilst two of the LEA applications were not considered to be eligible for support Invest NI continues to engage with the proposers of the remaining two projects.

Invest NI has no plans to reopen the scheme to new applications.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for the Economy how she intends to protect the interests of HMS Caroline staff who have been served with redundancy notices.

(AQW 7340/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) closed HMS Caroline (HMSC) to the public on 17th March 2020. After consultation with NMRN, I extended this period of temporary closure to 31st December 2020.

I am mindful of the impact that this period of temporary closure is having on the staff of HMSC, the majority of whom are currently on furlough through the Job Retention Scheme (JRS). I have, therefore, advised NMRN that my Department is content to pay the temporary layoff costs for these staff up to 31st December 2020, once the JRS scheme ends on 31st October. This will avoid redundancies and means that the NMRN will be able to retain the staff until the end of the period of temporary closure. We are currently working with NMRN to agree the necessary legal underpinnings. NMRN have advised us that, as they employ all HMSC staff, they considered that it was also necessary for them to begin redundancy consultations, in the event that this option should become necessary.

I am cognisant of the need for a prompt decision on the future of HMSC in Belfast and aim to have a clear plan for its future agreed before the end of the temporary closure period on 31st December 2020.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of (i) whether the Utility Regulator has adequately investigated the governance and remuneration of the System Operator for Northern Ireland; and (ii) the implications of their monopoly status in light of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7355/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The UR launched an official review of the SONI governance arrangements on 9 July 2019 to ensure the company is, and will continue to be, fit for purpose in securing the protection of the interests of NI consumers and other stakeholders. Plans to issue the SONI governance consultation were delayed as a consequence of the UR's response to the pandemic when they prioritised ensuring that consumers had access to a safe and reliable supply of energy and water. The UR has confirmed that they will publish the consultation before the end of October 2020. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the UR's investigation before the results of the consultation are known.
- (ii) The Withdrawal Agreement and the new Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland have no relevance to the monopoly status of SONI. Work carried out by SONI ensures that we maintain a safe and secure supply of energy within Northern Ireland by responding to changing conditions and planning for the future security of our energy supply. The Department has received no advice that would suggest a change to current arrangements is needed.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to provide details of programmes and information supplied by Invest NI to potential investors of (i) the benefits of locating in Derry; (ii) the high quality of life in the city and surrounding area; and (iii) the excellent broadband connectivity in the city.

(AQW 7393/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: International companies will assess locations based on a number of factors including, but not exclusively, demographics, costs, culture and quality of life.

Ultimately the investor decides as to where they visit based on their specific business needs and having considered the options available to them.

When potential investors indicate that they would like to explore Londonderry and the surrounding area as a potential location my officials at Invest NI;

- 1 Prepare detailed cost models providing potential investors with data on the competitiveness of the region and the commercial benefits that can be achieved. This data will be complemented with additional information such as evidence of skills and talent in the area, business operating costs, educational achievement statistics, ready access to world class University and College campuses and the availability of suitable business premises with excellent network connectivity.
- 2 Prepare detailed and bespoke visit programmes so that investors get to meet key stakeholders such as the Mayor and his/her officials, representatives of the University and College and existing indigenous and international investors. Historically these visits would have been physical however due to current circumstances Invest NI now has the ability to manage these visits virtually so that no potential opportunity to showcase the area is missed.
- 3 My officials at Invest NI will also, time permitting, take the opportunity to explore the city and the surrounding area with the potential investor. This ensures that the investor gets a feel of the area and its cultural and social heritage demonstrating the high quality of life that can be enjoyed.
- 4 Invest NI is seeing more interest from companies in the area as they experience greater challenges in securing talent elsewhere. As you know this is evidenced with the projects Invest NI has brought to the area such as Seagate, Firstsource, Allstate, Axa, Computershare and Convergys and more recently Alchemy Technology Services, Fintru and Danske Bank which help highlight the talent offering in the area.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on all mitigation measures taken to control spend on the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme.

(AQW 7440/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There have been a number of mitigation measures taken to control spend on the Scheme from 2015 onwards, including:

- The Renewable Heat Incentive Schemes (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, which introduced tiering and an annual usage cap for new applicants to the Scheme;
- The introduction of the Renewable Heat Incentive Schemes (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 and the subsequent suspension of the Scheme to new applicants;
- The Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 applied the 2015 cost control measures to all participants on the scheme for a period of one year;
- The Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) Act 2018 extended the 2017 measures for a further year; and
- The Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) Act 2019 introduced a new long-term tariff structure to the Scheme based on recommendations by independent experts.

The significant amendments to the tariffs from 1 April 2017 appears to have been a key factor in a substantial reduction in the overall heat generated under non-domestic RHI since 2016-17. The trend of the significant reduction in both heat output produced and the corresponding RHI payments has continued again in 2019-20.

Work is ongoing towards closure of the Non-Domestic RHI scheme in line with the commitment detailed in the New Decade, New Approach deal., I will bring forward proposals on these matters to the Executive in due course. There are a series of complex issues being considered, however I am committed to acting fairly to both participants who have acted in good faith and to taxpayers who fund the scheme.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the actions her Department has taken regarding the impact advertising deals involving Viewable Media UK and Grenke have had on local businesses.

(AQW 7441/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I refer to my previous answer to AQW 2129/17-22 of 28 February 2020 and my subsequent update to you on 25 June 2020 and can confirm that both the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (CCNI) and Trading Standards Service (TSS) continue to liaise with the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), where investigation of this specific matter is ongoing.

In June 2020 CCNI again wrote to the FCA; however, a substantive response is awaited. In the interim CCNI has provided the FCA with additional evidence, including media reports of the German and Australian authorities' investigations into Grenke. Additionally CCNI continues to engage with representatives of affected traders, with the latest meeting taking place in September 2020.

To assist the FCA in their monitoring of the situation TSS continues to seek evidence from impacted traders. Traders who wish to report their experience, or who require further information, should contact the TSS Consumerline service on 0300 123 62 62 or by email to: Consumerline@economy-ni.gov.uk.

I have every sympathy with those impacted by this situation and can assure you that officials within both CCNI and TSS will continue to actively engage with the FCA on this matter.

I would further encourage any trader affected to consider making a complaint to the Financial Ombudsman Service for Small Businesses, which has the power to settle disputes between small businesses and financial services providers.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to bring forward an aviation recovery strategy.
(AQW 7493/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Civil aviation is a reserved matter for the UK Department for Transport (DfT). In late 2018 DfT published a draft UK Aviation 2050 strategy for public consultation, which DfE responded to last year. In January 2020, in response to the collapse of Flybe, DfT announced a Regional Air Connectivity Review.

Both of these, unfortunately, have been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. DfT have recently advised that they intend to publish a UK Aviation Recovery Plan in the autumn, which will identify measures to support aviation in the short to medium term.

The need for, and the content of, an aviation recovery strategy for Northern Ireland will clearly be heavily influenced by the outworkings of these pieces of work from DfT. My Department will continue to engage with DfT to contribute to them, as required.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what action she will take to address digital poverty amongst higher education students.
(AQW 7556/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I fully recognise the importance of alleviating digital poverty amongst higher education students especially given the importance of online teaching in the current situation.

My Department already provides a non-repayable maintenance grant to students from lower income households, which can be used to purchase the necessary IT equipment to complete their course. As well as this grant, the universities have a range of measures in place to help reduce digital poverty among their students.

For example, Ulster University provides access bursaries to students from families on income support; students can decide how to spend the bursaries themselves, including on technology. Ulster University also uses the

Department's Widening Access Funds to stock its libraries with laptops, for students from a widening access background to use on a loan basis. Ulster University has also created a Technology Support Fund, whereby the University procures and provides securely imaged laptops for its most disadvantaged students, to enable them to adapt to teaching and learning in the hybrid, dual teaching mode envisaged for the 2020/21 academic year. The University has committed to supplying 1,000 laptops free to students who meet the eligibility criteria.

Queen's University has recently introduced a long-term laptop loan scheme, with no loan or hire fees to the student, to enable and support students who may be unable to access the relevant equipment to study online due to financial hardship, digital exclusion, or circumstances specifically related to Covid-19. Queen's is also seeking to ensure that students will have access to digital resources on-site, for example in the library, where Public Health regulations permit.

Students at Stranmillis University College have ready access to significant IT equipment and infrastructure across its campus, including a number of dedicated IT rooms. IT facilities are also available in the University College's library.

As well as being able to access on-campus IT equipment, students at St Mary's University College can borrow laptops from the institution if needed.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will provide additional funding for universities to provide laptops to students who need them.
(AQW 7557/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Pursuant to my reply to AQW 7556/17-22, our universities already have a range of mechanisms in place to provide laptops or access to IT facilities for students as needed. Ulster University, Queen's University and St Mary's University College provide laptop loan facilities to students, while students at Stranmillis University College have ready access to significant IT equipment and infrastructure across its campus, including a number of dedicated IT rooms. Accordingly, there are no plans to provide additional funding for universities to provide laptops to students at this time.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will amend the Debt Relief Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 to extend Debt Relief Orders beyond 12 months.
(AQW 7558/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Debt Relief Orders (DRO's) provide a low cost means of debt relief to those with lower levels of debt, few assets and limited income. Once granted, the debtor will enter a moratorium that will protect him or her from any recovery action by creditors for a 12 month period.

At the end of that period, providing the terms of the Order are complied with, and his or her circumstances do not change, the debtor is freed from all qualifying debts. I consider, therefore, that an extension of the DRO period would not provide any additional assistance or protection to individuals entering this scheme.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for (a) commencement dates; and (b) reporting dates of her Department's review into petroleum licencing; and (ii) to lay a copy of the review in the Assembly Library, including its scope and findings. (AQW 7567/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The review of petroleum licensing policy is being undertaken in accordance with the Executive's policy guidance toolkit <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/policy-making>; with a view to establishing a robust, evidence based petroleum licensing policy position. The overall timescale for policy development is dependent on a number of factors, including the complexity of the issues and the evidence required to inform a robust policy. The timescale for the completion of the review process and conclusion of the policy making process is not known at this time.

The following outlines some of the key steps in the review and provides an indication, where practicable, of the timescales involved.

The Department's review of petroleum licensing policy began in February 2019 and a high level review document was finalised in autumn 2019. This high level review, which included engagement with the Scottish and Welsh governments, highlighted that there was a lack of information on the NI specific impacts of

petroleum licensing and identified a need for independent research to ensure that there was sufficient evidence to develop a fully informed petroleum licensing policy position.

A key component of the policy development process is the data from the planned independent research. Work, which started in December 2019, is ongoing to award a contract for research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and development production.

It is anticipated that this research will take six months; the Department will use the data gathered to consider options and develop, through stakeholder engagement and consultation, evidence based petroleum licensing policy proposals.

All policy proposals will also be subject to environmental and regulatory impact assessment before being taken forward to full public consultation. I have already committed to taking all decisions in relation to petroleum licensing to the Executive.

If legislative change is required to give effect to the policy then there will be additional requirement to work with the Office of Legislative Council, the Assembly and the Executive.

All documentation in relation to the review, policy options and final policy proposals, including the Specification for the research, will be made publicly available on the Department's internet pages as well as through the public consultation process. In line with normal protocol, a copy of the review, and other relevant documents from the review process, will be laid in the Assembly Library.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to the UK Government notice concerning Directive 94/22/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council on the conditions for granting and using authorisations for the prospection, exploration and production of hydrocarbons published in the Official Journal of the European Union (2010/C 169/04), (i) whether an assessment taking account of "the continuing need for expeditious, thorough, efficient and safe exploration to identify oil and gas resources within onshore Northern Ireland" has been undertaken by her Department for petroleum licence applications (a) PLA1/16; and (b) PLA2/16; (ii) whether she will publish such assessments; and (iii) (a) when; and (b) how, such assessments were, or will be, made. (AQW 7569/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Directive 94/22/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 1994 on the conditions for granting and using authorisations for the prospection, exploration and production of hydrocarbons applies to plans and programmes whose first formal preparatory act was on, or after 1 July 1995.

The licensing regime in place in Northern Ireland, by means of the Petroleum (Production) Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 and the Petroleum Production Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1987, were adopted before 1 July 1995.

As I have outlined, my Department is currently undertaking a review of the petroleum licensing regime and in the process of developing an evidence base that will inform my recommendation to Executive colleagues on future petroleum licensing policy for Northern Ireland, which will underpin any final decisions on PLA1/16 and PLA2/16.

My Department recognises that under Directive 94/22/EC, the requirement to carry out a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is an integral and legislative requirement of policy development in relation to petroleum licensing. Therefore at the appropriate stage, any potential policy proposal will be subject to the SEA process.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy what legislative proposals she will bring forward to improve the work life balance for workers and families. (AQW 7575/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Employment Law in Northern Ireland is already supportive of work life balance and the needs of workers and families in a variety of ways. There is currently a statutory right to request flexible working and I know that many workers and their families appreciate the benefits that flexible working arrangements bring in terms of work life balance.

Other work life balance provisions that workers may avail of include the right to parental leave which can be taken any time up to a child's 18th birthday and time off for dependents, which covers both children and dependent adults that may require care.

I will consider this matter further as part of a wider plan to ensure that our employment legislation takes account of the needs of workers, while balancing the needs of business at this difficult time.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy how she intends to improve the rights of workers with care responsibilities. (AQW 7577/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I very much recognise and have previously acknowledged the often difficult but invaluable role that many workers play in providing care for others whilst managing their own careers. I also appreciate that many of the difficulties faced by working carers have been magnified by the impact of Covid-19.

In these difficult times I would continue to encourage employers to ensure that they do everything possible to ensure that those who are balancing work and care commitments are afforded the utmost flexibility and support.

Improving the rights of workers with care responsibilities is one of a range of issues that I will be considering when developing proposals for a strategic approach to the employment law framework in NI. I will ensure that any suggested measures to ease the pressure on working carers are given due consideration at that time.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the correspondence between her Department and the National Museum of the Royal Navy regarding funding for HMS Caroline, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7633/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There has been extensive correspondence over a number of years between the Department and the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) regarding funding for HMS Caroline (HMSC). It would not be practicable to detail all of this correspondence in full without having to commit a significant amount of staff time and this would detract staff from progressing other work on options going forward.

My officials liaise with NMRN representatives on financial and funding issues on an ongoing basis. This includes engagement with NMRN staff at all levels including the Director General, Chief of Staff and finance staff. The Department was first informed of these operating deficits in October 2018 and colleagues have been in continuous liaison and communication with the finance team in

NMRN to get more detail on the deficit. Additionally, my Department commissioned external consultants in March 2020 to establish and confirm the totality of historical operating deficits accumulated by the attraction.

Therefore these consultants have also been engaging with NMRN, on behalf of the Department, on a continual basis throughout 2020.

To help with cash-flow issues during the Covid-19 crisis, my Department made a substantial interim payment to NMRN in April 2020. This involved extensive financial and legal negotiations, resulting in a large payment which covers the majority of the historical claim to date.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the work of the Economic Advisory Group.

(AQW 7640/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Economic Advisory Group (EAG) brings together a focused group of experts to provide me with independent advice, aimed at challenging and developing public policy and strategic thinking on the economy. The EAG members are experts in their field and their experience at the coal face of industry, growing and expanding thriving innovative businesses will be invaluable to me as we move forward in ensuring we develop an economy that works for everyone.

The approach to this EAG is in line with its original remit as set out in the Independent Review of Economic Policy which recommended "the establishment of a small advisory body, comprising expertise on regional economic development (drawn from business and economics), to provide independent advice to the Economy Minister."

The Group has met five times since June and have provided advice and opinion on many issues central to developing a strong future economic proposition such as competitiveness, skills, research and development and innovation.

Going forward, the EAG will have an important role to play in supporting the development of a new Economic Strategy and advising how Government can work with businesses to promote economic growth, test our ambition for the future and ensure we are focussed on the key areas of opportunity.

The Strategy will provide a real opportunity to set out Northern Ireland's distinctive offering as a successful recovering and growing economy.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy when she was first made aware there was a funding shortfall for HMS Caroline. (AQW 7729/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I first became aware that there was an operating deficit with the HMS Caroline (HMSC) visitor attraction in January 2020, shortly after I took up my appointment as Economy Minister.

My Department was first informed in October 2018, by the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN), that operational deficits, dating back to 2015/16, had occurred in respect of the project. This was unexpected as the original business case indicated no deficits would be likely to occur on the project until 2022/23. External consultants were commissioned in March 2020, at my Department's expense, to establish and confirm the totality of these historical operating deficits being accumulated.

To help with cash-flow issues during the Covid-19 crisis, my Department made a substantial interim payment to NMRN in April 2020. This involved extensive financial and legal negotiations, resulting in a large payment which covers the majority of the historical claim to date. The balance of the claim will be paid subject to the outcome of the consultant's report.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the agreed funding model for HMS Caroline; and (ii) all funding provided to the National Museum of the Royal Navy in respect of HMS Caroline.

(AQW 7731/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) My Department has obligations with the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN), under a Legal Agreement signed in 2012, to keep HMS Caroline open to the public as a heritage visitor attraction. It was being operated by NMRN Operations under an Interim Operator Agreement with DfE which expired on 30th June 2020. Claims for costs due under the agreements are paid in arrears.

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) closed HMSC to the public on 17th March 2020. After consultation with NMRN, I extended this period of temporary closure to 31st December 2020. There were several reasons for extending the closure and these included the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the local tourism sector, disappointing visitor numbers, substantial deficits being accumulated by the attraction and the decision by NMRN not to sign a new operating agreement without a new financial model being put into place.

Since this decision, my officials have been working to identify the full range of options for the long term future of the attraction. Consultants have been appointed to identify all potential delivery models, which would include funding models and options that support the retention of the Ship in Belfast and to make value for money recommendations on these.

- (ii) My Department was first informed that there were operating deficits in October 2018. This was unexpected as the original business plan indicated no deficits would occur on the project until 2022/23. External consultants were commissioned to establish and confirm the totality of historical operating deficits accumulated by the attraction.

To help with cash-flow issues during the Covid-19 crisis, my Department made a substantial interim payment to NMRN in April 2020. This involved extensive financial and legal negotiations, resulting in a large payment which covers the majority of the historical claim to date. The balance of the claim will be paid subject to the outcome of the consultant's report.

I have also agreed to reimburse the NMRN monthly in arrears for the costs they have incurred in respect of the repairs, maintenance, staffing and oversight of the attraction while it is temporarily closed however I cannot begin making these payments until the NMRN has signed and agreed the legal agreement with the Department for the period of temporary closure.

My Department, via Tourism NI (TNI), also provided substantial funding during the Capital phase of the HMS Caroline project. Circa £4.5m of TNI grant was provided to match fund Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) monies, which facilitated the restoration and renovation of the Ship, Alexandra Dock and Blocks 1-3 of the Pump House.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy, following the Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcement of a £2 billion Green Homes Grant scheme to upgrade homes across England, whether a similar scheme will be made available for homeowners and landlords in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7748/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Green Homes Grant Scheme applies in England only and does not extend to Northern Ireland. Furthermore, as it does not constitute a new funding commitment, it has not resulted in any additional Barnett consequential funding to deliver a similar scheme here.

Support for energy efficiency in buildings is a key theme being considered in the new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland currently under development. My officials will be engaging closely with their counterparts in Whitehall as the new Greens Homes Grant Scheme is rolled out, in order to identify best practice and suitable options for future support mechanisms that might be developed for Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy what proportion of the recently announced figure of £8.4 million for skills and training will be allocated to ICT and computer-based training.

(AQW 7779/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The additional funding for Skills and Youth Training has been allocated to support three existing programmes, and one new Covid-19 intervention as set out in the table below.

Allocation Area	Allocation Amount
Youth Training demand pressure (Training for Success)	£3.5m
Training for Success	£1.3m
Short term skills interventions	£3.0m
Skills Focus Programme	£0.3m
InnovateUs programme	£0.3m
	£8.4m

All of these programmes are driven by demand which makes it difficult to place an exact quantum of spend in a particular sector at this stage.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is working on a bid to the Department of Finance to provide financial support to Northern Ireland airports.

(AQW 7792/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To clarify, I am not responsible for the funding of airports, that work is led by the Department of Finance and the Department for Infrastructure. My responsibility is with maintaining and enhancing Northern Ireland's air connectivity, both domestically and internationally. In doing so, I fully acknowledge that civil aviation is a reserved matter for the UK Department for Transport (DfT). Hence, I have made no bids to the Department of Finance, nor am I working on any, to provide funding to Northern Ireland airports. In May the Executive put in place measures, in respect of rate payments, to assist Northern Ireland businesses impacted by COVID-19. As a result, all three Northern Ireland airports are receiving 100% rates relief until 31 March 2021, which equates to £2.2m of support, in total.

I understand that the Department of Finance is continuing to engage with the airports and to monitor the sector as it recovers, including consideration of options for further support.

I fully recognise that air connectivity is essential to rebuilding Northern Ireland's economy and my Department is always willing to consider any requests for support from airports/airlines that deliver value for money and are compliant with EU State Aid regulations.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has issued any generation consents under Article 39 of the Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 for battery storage developments in Northern Ireland, specifically for (i) Kells BESS; (ii) Gort BESS; (iii) Drumkee BESS; (iv) Mullavilly BESS; and (v) Lisnabreeny BESS.

(AQW 7825/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department granted consent under Article 39 of the Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 to (1) Mullavilly Energy Ltd on 5 June 2020 (2) Drumkee Energy Ltd on 5 June 2020 and (3) Kells BES Ltd on 3 September 2020.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the steps she has taken to secure the future of HMS Caroline.

(AQW 7837/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Due to the Covid-19 crisis the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) closed HMS Caroline (HMSC) to the public on 17th March 2020. After consultation with both NMRN and the Heritage Lottery Fund (NI), I extended this period of temporary closure to 31st December 2020. There were several reasons for extending the closure and these included the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the local tourism sector, disappointing visitor numbers, substantial deficits being accumulated by the attraction and the decision by NMRN not to renew an existing operating agreement without a new financial model being put into place. The NMRN notified the Department of their decision not to renew the operating agreement on 10th June 2020. This did not leave sufficient time for the Department to formulate a new funding model, redraft a new operating agreement or to procure a new operator of the attraction.

Since then, my officials have been working to identify the full range of options for the long term future of HMSC in Belfast. Consultants have been appointed to identify all potential delivery models and options that support the retention of the Ship in Belfast and to make value for money recommendations on these. They have already undertaken an extensive series of discussions with the relevant stakeholders and have begun to shortlist potential options. Considerable progress, therefore, has been made to date in obtaining the necessary detail to inform the decision-making process.

I am mindful of the impact that this period of temporary closure is having on the staff of HMSC, the majority of whom are currently on furlough through the Job Retention Scheme (JRS). I have, therefore, advised NMRN that my Department is

content to pay the temporary layoff costs for these staff up to 31st December 2020, once the JRS scheme ends on 31st October. This will avoid redundancies and means that the NMRN will be able to retain the staff until the end of the period of temporary closure. We are currently working with NMRN to agree the necessary legal underpinnings.

I am cognisant of the need for a prompt decision on the future of HMSC in Belfast and, to this end, aim to have a clear plan for its future agreed before the end of the temporary closure period on 31st December 2020. I remain committed to exploring all options to enable this important heritage visitor attraction to remain in Belfast.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy (i) which years of audited accounts; and (ii) which balance sheet dates, were submitted to her Department by the applicants, and the body corporates having control of the applicants, for the two current Petroleum Licence Applications PLA1/16 and PLA2/16.
(AQW 7879/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In respect of PLA1/16, submitted by EHA Exploration Ltd, the Department received an interim set of accounts from EHA (Jersey) Ltd for the period 11 November 2014 to 31 December 2015.

In respect of PLA2/16, submitted by Tamboran Resources (UK) Ltd, the Department received the following: Spinner Energy Ltd (Report & Accounts) for the period 01 January 2014 to 31 December 2015 and TRUK (Unaudited Financial Statements) for the period 01 January 2013 to 31 December 2015.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will publish the capability assessment review of Ulster University conducted by her officials.
(AQW 7948/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I will not be publishing the capability assessment review of Ulster University conducted by my officials due to the commercially sensitive content of the report.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, what support her Department will offer travel agents to help the sector during the winter period.
(AQW 8015/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The economic impact of COVID-19 is unprecedented. Huge economic impacts that might normally take months or years to unfold occurred within weeks as a result of lockdown and industry shutdowns.

The travel industry has been impacted particularly hard, both locally and on a global scale. This is as a result of the fact that we have been and are still very much in the midst of a public health crisis. All of the decisions that have been made in relation to foreign travel have been deemed necessary by the NI Executive, based on the very latest health advice and scientific evidence.

The Executive introduced an unprecedented range of financial support to help businesses impacted by Covid-19 with the objective of protecting jobs, preventing business closures and promoting economic recovery.

The Department for Economy has paid out more than £340million collectively across three grant schemes. Travel Agents were eligible to apply for all three Business Support Schemes introduced by the Department

To date, 11 Travel Agents benefitted from a grant via the £25k Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure scheme. A further 32 Travel Agents received a grant via the NI Microbusiness Hardship Fund. Travel Agents also benefit from a one year business rates relief introduced by the Department of Finance.

The UK Government have implemented a range of interventions to support business including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

With the tapering and eventual close of existing UK Government schemes to support business, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced his winter economy plan to protect jobs and support businesses over the coming months, at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic will unfortunately continue to have significant public health and economic impacts for our society. This includes a new Job Support Scheme, added flexibility in the repayment of the UK Government backed loan schemes and an extension of the 15% VAT reduction for eligible companies in the hospitality and tourism sectors.

The Chancellor's winter economy plan also provides for an extension to the self-employment scheme until the end of January 2021 and a further grant may be available until the end of April 2021, depending on circumstances.

On 1 October 2020, I met with a representative of the travel agency industry, and I will consider all of the issues raised at this meeting.

I will continue to examine and pursue further means to support the local economy and business sectors in whatever way possible. In considering further interventions, including additional funding or packages of financial support, it will be for the Executive collectively, to determine how this will be allocated to best support economic recovery moving forward.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the activities and the remit of her Economic Advisory Group.
(AQW 8040/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Economic Advisory Group (EAG) brings together a focused group of experts to provide me with independent advice, aimed at challenging and developing public policy and strategic thinking on the economy. The EAG members are experts in their field and their experience at the coal face of industry, growing and expanding thriving innovative businesses will be invaluable to me as we move forward in ensuring we develop an economy that works for everyone.

The approach to this EAG is in line with its original remit as set out in the Independent Review of Economic Policy which recommended “the establishment of a small advisory body, comprising expertise on regional economic development (drawn from business and economics), to provide independent advice to the Economy Minister.”

The Group has met five times since June and have provided advice and opinion on many issues central to developing a strong future economic proposition such as competitiveness, skills, research and development and innovation.

Going forward, the EAG will have an important role to play in supporting the development of a new Economic Strategy and advising how Government can work with businesses to promote economic growth, test our ambition for the future and ensure we are focussed on the key areas of opportunity.

The Strategy will provide a real opportunity to set out Northern Ireland’s distinctive offering as a successful recovering and growing economy.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy how many Queens University students staying at the hall of residence have contracted COVID-19; and how many have been tested.
(AQW 8112/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department does not collect or hold information on the number of students living at Queen’s University halls of residence, nor on the number of students there who are tested for, or confirmed with, COVID-19.

You may wish to contact Queen’s University directly for this information.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the impact on the local economy and town centre of moving Bangor Central Integrated Primary School from its current location to Balloo/Gransha.
(AQW 8278/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Assessing all the costs and benefits of decisions on school facilities is something that is undertaken within the Department of Education. This is not within the remit of my Department and would be better referred to the Department of Education.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has (i) met with Queen’s University with regards to stopping the spread of COVID-19; (ii) instructed Queen’s University to stop face-to-face teaching; and (iii) instructed Queen’s University to shut its campus.
(AQW 8341/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Our universities are responsible for their own procedures and protocols for re-opening, without direction from my Department. That said, I and my officials are in very regular contact with both Queen’s and Ulster Universities, and I have sought assurances from them on provision for a safe opening.

Queen’s University has confirmed that the health, safety and wellbeing of its staff and students is its first priority. Plans for a safe return to campus have been developed in accordance with the NI Executive’s Pathway to Recovery plan, and are in adherence to all guidelines issued by the Public Health Agency.

While my Department is responsible for funding universities for teaching and research, they are otherwise autonomous institutions and I have no remit to intervene or give them direction. The spread of COVID-19 is a public health issue, and I therefore expect the universities to follow all public health guidance.

I do not have the legal vires to instruct a university on how it should conduct its learning provision, or on whether it should keep its campus open. As autonomous institutions, it is for the universities themselves to decide on the appropriate balance of online and face-to-face tuition. If there are some instances, such as practical work, which cannot be delivered effectively online and has to take place in a classroom or laboratory environment, then I expect the universities to ensure the highest safety procedures are in place, in line with prevailing public health guidance.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to AQW 2293/17-22, why the information requested was disclosed to the Irish News in response to a Freedom of Information request.
(AQW 7540/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The reply to AQW 2293/17-22 was issued on 21 February 2020. Subsequent to that reply, the Assembly Commission received a number of requests for information under the Freedom

of Information Act 2000. The responses to those FoI requests included a review of the provision of information that covered the subject matter of the reply to AQW 2293/17-22. In light of that review, the information was provided to the Irish News.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 16 October 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress reports (i) they have requested of their Department's racial equality champion since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020; and (ii) their Department's racial equality champion has provided since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020.
(AQW 7117/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Racial Equality Champion in TEO is also Head of the Division which includes the Racial Equality Unit and in this dual role oversees delivery of all aspects of the Racial Equality Strategy. The Champion therefore provides regular updates to us on progress of the implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy and specifically the key actions within it.

Reports on progress of the Racial Equality Strategy are also provided to the Good Relations Programme Board. The TEO Racial Equality Champion attends and provides a verbal update at these meetings and also attends and updates on progress at the Racial Equality Subgroup meetings.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much funding has been provided to Transgender NI, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 7370/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has not provided any funding to Transgender NI in each of the last three years.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when can Members expect their response to the recent Nation Brands Index 2020 COVID-19 bulletin.
(AQW 7533/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: NISRA regularly publishes a wide range of Statistical bulletins, which includes the Nation Brands Index 2020 COVID-19 bulletin. We do not routinely provide responses to the publication of Statistical bulletins.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the factors his Department has identified that led to Owenkillew River (Special Area of Conservation UK0030233) exceeding its critical load of nitrogen deposition with a three-year average annual exceedance of 322 per cent.
(AQW 7471/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The current maximum nitrogen deposition at the Owenkillew River SAC is 27 kgN/ha/yr for the old sessile oak woodland feature and 13.3kgN/ha/yr for the river habitat. Source attribution data for this site identifies the top 3 emission sources contributing to N deposition as: Livestock (approx. 54%), transboundary imports (approx. 17%) and fertiliser application (4%). Other sources include international shipping and road transport.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline a timeframe for the transfer of the functions of the Reservoirs Act (NI) 2015 to the Department for Infrastructure.
(AQW 7665/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials have progressed the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order in respect of the Reservoirs Act (NI) 2015 from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to the Department for Infrastructure.

On 2 June 2020 Minister Mallon agreed to accept the transferred functions. My officials arranged to have the relevant functions included in legislation being taken forward by TEO, which included transfers of functions between other Departments.

The Executive at its meeting of 1 October 2020 (Reconvened 5 October 2020) agreed the recommendations set out in paper E (20) 229 - Draft Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020. The Order will be laid in the Assembly under the affirmative resolution procedure and will come into operation on the day after Assembly approval.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the implications for animals moving across the border for slaughter or as carcasses, should the Protocol for Ireland/Northern Ireland be unilaterally abandoned by the UK Government.

(AQW 7714/17-22)

Mr Poots: There is no suggestion that the Protocol for Ireland/Northern Ireland will be abandoned by the UK Government.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how he will minimise the costs to the agri-food sector of complying with the requirements of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7715/17-22)

Mr Poots: A key ask for DAERA is for the UK Government and the EU to work together to ensure that trade friction and costs are minimised where it is possible to do so under the legislation. It is in all our interests that there is a successful outcome to the trade negotiations by the end of the year. In addition, there should not be any additional administrative burdens or costs to businesses and consumers.

I have already sought assurance from the UK Government that they will meet any associated costs placed on Northern Ireland business as a result of the implementation of the protocol, including as a result of sanitary and phytosanitary checks. I will continue to press them on the matter.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he is taking to help prepare the agri-food sector for the possibility of the transition period ending without a trade agreement with the EU.

(AQW 7716/17-22)

Mr Poots: One of my key priorities is for the UK and the EU to agree a zero tariff, zero quota limit deal, and to have maximum alignment in terms of SPS arrangements. I believe there is still time to achieve this and it is in everyone's interest that we do. If there is no trade agreement between the UK and the EU, the implementation of the Protocol becomes even more challenging. We do not know exactly what the trade agreement will be and that is subject to ongoing negotiations, of which the 9th and last scheduled round took place last week.

Contingency planning is forming part of my Department's preparations as a high priority, and external communications will form part of that work.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what legal advice the Minister has sought, or plans to seek, ahead of his introduction of a Legislative Consent Motion on the UK Internal Market Bill.

(AQW 7717/17-22)

Mr Poots: It is not my role as DAERA Minister to bring forward a Legislative Consent Motion on the UK Internal Market Bill.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the infrastructure that will be required at ports in Northern Ireland under the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7718/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Official Controls Regulation (OCR) requirements are part of domestic law as a result of Article 5(4) of the Northern Ireland Protocol and s. 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) must comply with this legal requirement. The OCR is included in Annex 2 of the Northern Ireland Protocol to the Withdrawal Agreement, which was entered into by the UK and the EU.

In common with the UK Government, I am clear that the Northern Ireland Protocol needs to be implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of agri-food trade and does not increase costs for our businesses and people living in Northern Ireland. Officials are therefore working to minimise the need for infrastructure.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) how many Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) features have been assessed; and (ii) the total area of ASSIs that have been assessed, broken down by (a) total; and (b) category of feature, for each year since 2013.

(AQW 7740/17-22)

Mr Poots: The tables below summarise the requested information.

Table 1. Number of ASSI features assessed since 2013.

Financial Year	ASSI feature categories					Total
	Aquatic	Birds	Earth Science	Habitats	Invertebrates	
2013/2014	12	369	4	50	3	438
2014/2015	29	0	0	30	0	59
2015/2016	24	0	0	34	7	65
2016/2017	10	0	0	59	4	73
2017/2018	12	0	14	41	6	73
2018/2019	6	0	25	49	3	83
2019/2020	0	369	37	30	0	436

Table 2. Total and feature category areas (in hectares, to nearest whole number) of ASSIs that have been assessed since 2013.

Financial Year	ASSI feature categories					Total
	Aquatic	Birds	Earth Science	Habitats	Invertebrates	
2013/2014	6016	73637	9040	5855	448	94996
2014/2015	14164	0	0	6613	0	20777
2015/2016	9392	0	0	5416	5329	20136
2016/2017	5738	0	0	17759	1833	25329
2017/2018	6507	0	401	98189	49	16775
2018/2019	4861	0	2270	4765	8916	20812
2019/2020	0	73637	6625	1290	0	81552

Note that some ASSIs contain more than one feature category so that these ASSI areas are used in each feature category calculation for that year.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail his Department's plans to reform the legislation or practices on the use of snares, including any consideration given to the banning of snares.

(AQW 7745/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have no immediate plans to reform the legislation or practises on the use of restraints. I understand that, although not widespread, there is still a need to retain restraints to control pest species in the countryside. For example, some landowners use them to reduce the impact of foxes on new born lambs during the lambing season. Gamekeepers also use them periodically to reduce the destruction of game birds by foxes at certain times of the year. Also for free range poultry restraints can be used on foxes as they can slaughter, at times, over 100 birds in a single incident. A code of practice was introduced for the use of restraints, this appears to have worked well in limiting unnecessary suffering on wildlife.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the current legislation for local councils on controlling grey squirrel numbers.

(AQW 7771/17-22)

Mr Poots: There is no legislation relating to councils specifically on controlling grey squirrel numbers but they do have obligations under the Biodiversity Duty, outlined in the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 to protect and enhance native biodiversity.

The Invasive Alien Species Strategy for Northern Ireland² details how the actions on invasive alien species occur through different interventions – targeted eradication, awareness programs, local action groups and research and development.

On the 1st December 2019, in line with Defra, and the other devolved administrations, the Department introduced new domestic legislation, The Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019, to fulfil its obligations under Regulation (EU) No. 1143/2014 on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species.

The Regulation imposes strict restrictions on a list of species known as 'Species of Union Concern'. Following a public consultation, 11 of the Species of Union Concern were designated as being 'Widely Spread Species' (WSS)⁴ in Northern Ireland. The Grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)⁵ is one of these species.

In November 2019, Departmental officials held stakeholder information events at venues throughout Northern Ireland, targeting a variety of stakeholders, including councils. At those events, officials emphasised that all stakeholders and landowners would be expected to assist the Department by taking positive action to remove any of the WSS from their land. In the case of the grey squirrel, as is detailed in the WSS Management Measures, this is especially a requirement in areas where they are a threat to red squirrel populations.

Departmental officials, via the Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum, facilitate training and resources to currently 13 Red Squirrel volunteer groups and two NGO lead project teams who work with the statutory agencies and land owners to secure the future of the red squirrel and to reduce damage to woodland by the greys.

1. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/biodiversity-duty-guidelines-for-public-bodies-may-2016.pdf>
2. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/invasive-alien-species-strategy-northern-ireland>
3. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2019/159/contents/made>
4. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/widely-spread-species-management-measures>
5. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Annex%20C7%20Grey%20squirrel%20Management%20Measures.PDF>

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will lay in the Assembly Library a copy of all documentation for a proposed Certificate of Lawful Use or Development at Larne Port in connection with his Department's application to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, on or about 15 September 2020.

(AQW 7916/17-22)

Mr Poots: The application submitted to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council in respect of Larne Port is not in the public domain. My officials are assessing this request under Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR) and will respond in due course.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he is taking to reduce the (i) production; and (ii) sale of single-use plastics.

(AQW 7939/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have advised you in previous correspondence that DAERA has joined the other UK Administrations in becoming a member of the UK Plastics Pact this year. In contributing to the pact, the Department is directly funding the work of its organisers, the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), to develop and disseminate approaches to reduce the environmental impact of plastic packaging. Membership of the pact also enables the Department to use its contact networks to share innovations, data, analyses and reports with businesses.

I also advised you that I am also working closely with my Ministerial colleagues across the UK in introducing legislation to promote a Circular Economy waste package which will help to keep plastic in the economy and out of the environment. Together with other UK Ministers I am considering introducing legislation on a Deposit Return Scheme and an Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme, both of which would significantly help to increase the rate of plastic recycling and would be supported by a HM Treasury plastic packaging tax that is specifically designed to incentivise the market for recycled plastic. Further consultations on these schemes are proposed in 2021. I am also presently reviewing the carrier bag levy as there is evidence that many reusable bags are only being used once.

My department's College for Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) has developed long-standing expertise and specialism regarding the use of packaging for food and drink products. CAFRE's Packaging Technologists provide technology transfer support to businesses in Northern Ireland, helping them to critically analyse and select packaging that will perform to meet the requirements of the producer and consumer. CAFRE is working with food and drink processors from the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA) to potentially reduce plastic food packaging.

My Department continues to explore a range of approaches including partnering with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful (KNIB) and Sustainable NI in a Tackling Plastic project that is working with schools and businesses and with the public sector in identifying practical ways to reduce or eliminate many unnecessary single-use plastics (SUP). As part of this work my Department has taken advice from other UK government departments and has been engaging with other agencies, departments and including working with Department of Finance, Construction & Procurement Delivery colleagues to find ways to encourage suppliers to reduce their SUP consumption.

I hope you can appreciate that these measures address issues around the production and sale of single use plastics, conserving resources through reuse and recycling as well as supporting the twin aims of reducing plastic pollution and addressing climate change.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the effect of the COVID-19 outbreak on recycling rates across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7940/17-22)

Mr Poots: To date, statistics have only been published covering the period to 31 March 2020. These figures for the rolling 12 month period have shown a 0.3% decrease from the previous quarter (October 2019 – December 2019). This reporting period covers a small portion of the start of the pandemic but is not enough to draw accurate conclusions on the impact of the crisis on recycling rates as a whole. Provisional information for household recycling during the quarter, April to June 20 will not be available until the end of October 20.

Northern Ireland is already well positioned in terms of recycling. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, the latest official statistics showed a provisional household recycling rate of 52.3% for the 12-month rolling period up to 31 December 2019. The EU 2020 target of 50% 'waste from households' recycling was also met in 2019. During the last decade the household recycling rate has increased by 15% points. In order to normalise recycling behaviours post-Covid and build on the momentum for recycling observed in recent years, communications and capital funding initiatives are being delivered to assist with recovery.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will increase funding to local councils to help support the provision of food waste bins.

(AQW 7941/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Food Waste Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, introduced by DAERA, requires all local councils to provide a separate collection stream for food waste from households.

DAERA has been supporting councils since as early as 2010, initially providing funding to assist them with the introduction of a separate brown bin collection. In total, between 2010/11 and 2018/19, £5,478,991 has been provided by my Department, initially to support local councils in their preparation for the Food Waste Regulations being introduced in 2015, and thereafter to assist them in extending their food waste collections.

This funding and support has helped ensure that all local councils have now successfully introduced separate food waste collections from households, resulting in over one million tonnes of biodegradable waste being diverted from landfill between 2015 and 2019.

My Department will continue to support local councils directly, and through existing delivery partners such as Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), to deliver campaigns designed to effect positive behaviour change in relation to food waste.

As part of the discussion on Future Recycling and Separate Collection of Waste of a Household Nature in Northern Ireland, my Department is looking at ways to increase the diversion of food waste from the residual waste stream and has asked stakeholders to consider options for extending the food regulations to cover food waste collections from non-food businesses as well as considering options such as weekly separate collection of food waste from households where this is not already offered. This consultation closed on Sunday 4th October and a summary of responses will be published in due course.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of written assembly questions his Department has answered since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7994/17-22)

Mr Poots: Since the restoration of devolution up until the 01 October 2020 I have answered 531 written assembly questions.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of pieces of official Ministerial correspondence he has issued since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7995/17-22)

Mr Poots: Since the restoration of devolution up until the 01 October 2020 I have responded to 614 correspondence cases.

This figure does not include responses to invitations, draft executive papers or press queries.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of appearances he has made since the restoration of devolution (i) before the Assembly; and (ii) before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.

(AQW 7996/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) 25 times before the Assembly; and
- (ii) 2 times before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of times he has appeared before his Statutory Committee since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7997/17-22)

Mr Poots: To date I have appeared a total of 4 times before the AERA Committee.

- 30 January 2020 – Initial Meeting with Committee;
- 6 May 2020 – I updated the Committee on Covid-19 Issues;
- 22 May 2020 – I attended an exceptional meeting following the announcement of £25m to the Department; and
- 1 July 2020 – I provided a further update on Covid-19 and transition arrangements.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how many tests to detect an unpleasant odour have been carried out in the Colin area of West Belfast in the last three years; and (ii) how often are these tests carried out given the large number of complaints from residents.

(AQW 8050/17-22)

Mr Poots:

Inspectors from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency have carried out 34 qualitative odour assessments in the Colin area and in addition, independently accredited olfactometry testing consultants have carried out 3 separate quantitative tests (in accordance with BS EN 13725:

- (i) 2003) at one regulated site in the last three years.
- (ii) Given the recent increase in odour complaints from residents in the Colin area, 17 odour assessments have been carried out since August 2020.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when AQW 6605/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 8097/17-22)

Mr Poots: Please note AQW 6605/17-22 was answered on 5 October 2020.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many complaints about (i) air pollution; and (ii) noxious gas, has the NI Environment Agency received in relation to (a) Mullaghglass; and (b) Montupet sites, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 8123/17-22)

Mr Poots: Complaints about these sites relate to odour nuisance and do not make a distinction between air pollution and noxious gas.

There have been the following number of odour complaints in relation to the Mullaghglass and Montupet sites:

	2018	2019	2020
Mullaghglass	20	84	104
Montupet	50	40	29

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when AQW 6602/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 8158/17-22)

Mr Poots: Please note AQW 6602/17-22 was answered on 7 October 2020.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the £1.5 million allocation in April of emergency support to Northern Ireland's sea fishing fleet to enable them to deal with the immediate impacts of the pandemic, for a breakdown of (i) which companies received support; and (ii) the amount allocated to each business.

(AQW 8162/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department has paid out through the Covid 19 Fishing Support Scheme £1.32m (approximately £1.02m to over 10m vessels and £300k to under 10m vessels) in respect of 171 fishing vessels.

A breakdown of those who received support and the amount of grant paid to each recipient is provided below. Where the recipient of grant was a private individual this has been denoted as a "Private Owner".

Owner	Approved Funding
TRADALAI EISC UI HANNAGAIN TEORANTA	£21,300.00
GLEN ARTIC NI LTD	£13,650.00
SEACLIFF FISHING LTD	£13,650.00
SEINE NET LTD	£5,400.00
DEMARUS FISHING COMPANY LIMITED	£13,650.00

Owner	Approved Funding
SAGITTARIUS FISHING CO LTD	£13,650.00
RIBHINN DONN LIMITED	£13,650.00
FISHING TRAWLERS N.I. LTD	£13,650.00
SEINE NET LIMITED	£13,650.00
GLENLUCE FISHING COMPANY LTD	£27,300.00
ARDGLASS SHELLFISH SUPPLIES LTD	£3,150.00
KIROAN LIMITED	£13,650.00
LOUGH FOYLE FISHING COMPANY LIMITED	£3,150.00
TRINITY HOLDINGS EIRE LIMITED	£13,650.00
LEESTLIN TRAWLERS LIMITED	£13,650.00
PRIVATE OWNER	£3,150.00
PRIVATE OWNER	£3,150.00
PRIVATE OWNER	£13,650.00
PRIVATE OWNER	£3,150.00
PRIVATE OWNER	£3,150.00
PRIVATE OWNER	£10,650.00
PRIVATE OWNER	£5,400.00
PRIVATE OWNER	£13,650.00
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Owner	Approved Funding
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Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for the total figure of payments allocated to farmers in the South Antrim constituency from the recent agricultural COVID-19 support package.

(AQW 8229/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Agricultural Commodities (Coronavirus, Income Support) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 opened for applications from the dairy, beef and sheep sectors on 7 September and closed on the 23 September. There were 483 farm businesses in the South Antrim Constituency that were eligible for support to the value of £874,479.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) all measures, schemes, programmes and; (ii) their associated costs and expenditure that were implemented by his Department which had the objective of improving water quality or preventing its deterioration, for each year from 2007 to 2019.

(AQW 8256/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Nitrates Action Programme (NAP) was first introduced across Northern Ireland in 2007 and applies to all farms. It implements the EU Nitrates Directive (91/676/EEC) which aims to improve water quality by protecting water against pollution caused by nutrients from the spreading of animal manures, chemical fertilisers and other nutrient-containing materials spread onto land.

The NAP is reviewed and revised every 4 years and the fourth NAP covering the period 2019 – 2022 is in place. It is renamed the Nutrients Action Programme as it now also incorporates the Phosphorus (Use in Agriculture) Regulations. The Phosphorus (Use in Agriculture) Regulations 2006 and 2014 placed limits and measures on the use of chemical phosphorus fertiliser to reduce the risk of water pollution.

The Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS) was an agricultural grant scheme funded by the former Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) which provided financial assistance to farmers to install new or improved manure and slurry storage facilities on farms. The FNMS operated between 1 January 2005 and 31 December 2009. It aimed to help Northern Ireland farmers comply with the NAP and was a key measure to help prevent water pollution from agricultural sources. To offset a proportion of the total cost of installing storage facilities DARD provided farmers with a grant of 60%, on eligible expenditure of up to £85,000. A total of 3,933 claims were processed by the Department, representing some 15% of livestock farms with the total grant aid paid just over £121 million.

Encouraging use of low emission slurry spreading equipment (LESSE) has been an important policy on reducing the impact of farming on the environment for a number of years. DARD funded support for LESSE under the Manure Efficiency Technology Scheme (METS) from 2010 – 2014, providing some £3 million in grant aid for 307 machines over three tranches. Support continued through two tranches of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme with some 150 machines funded and £0.9 million in grant aid paid.

The Sustainable Use of Poultry Litter Project/Small Business Research Initiative supported the development of sustainable technologies for utilising poultry litter and approximately £1.2 million of funding was provided.

The River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) implement the Water Framework Directive. The RBMPs contain a wide range of measures to improve and protect water quality which cover agriculture, waste water treatment and forestry and other sectors. During the first cycle RBMP for 2009 – 2015, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) ran a Water Quality Improvement Scheme and Challenge Fund to enable environmental Non-Government Organisations to carry out projects with practical benefits for the water environment. A large range of projects aimed at improving water quality in Northern Ireland were delivered. In total £337k was spent delivering 44 water quality projects across 36 organisations for the period 2012-2014. Some £1.8 million was also invested by DARD during the first cycle RBMP to address the measures for the reduction in phosphorus inputs. NIEA has also supported the Ballinderry Rivers Trust to deliver a number of water quality improvement projects from 2012 – 2019 with some £483k of grants paid.

An estimated £2.8 million has been invested on water quality related measures under DARD Agri-Environment Schemes from 2009 – 2015. The Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) was launched in 2017 and provides a range of voluntary options aimed at improving water quality, biodiversity, habitat condition and sequestering carbon. From 2017 – 2019, two tranches of the EFS were implemented which included some £8 million of expenditure on water quality measures on-farm, including watercourse protection with fencing and riparian margins.

The above list is not entirely exhaustive and for some schemes estimates have been provided as exact costs are difficult to acquire.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the environmental impact of recent actions to release the valves and lowering the water level at Portavoe Reservoir.

(AQW 8284/17-22)

Mr Poots: Departmental officers have visited this site on a number of occasions, most recently on 7 October. Water levels were found to be slightly lower (approximately 20cm below usual level), but within the normal range for a reservoir. There has been no apparent impact on biodiversity, fish or other wildlife from this action, and that should remain the case as long as water levels are not subject to further lowering or unnatural fluctuations.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in light of the legal opinion of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine that no legal barriers exist for a future application for Protected Geographical Indication status, to outline the next steps for a potential all-island Protected Geographical Indication application for Irish grass-fed beef. (AQO 870/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) recently held a national consultation about Bord Bia's proposal for an application to register 'Irish Grass-fed Beef' under the European Commission's PGI scheme. As envisaged in the consultation, the proposed application would only extend to cattle born, raised, finished, slaughtered, chilled and quartered in the Republic of Ireland. I have written to the DAFM Minister, Charlie McConalogue TD, asking that we work together to ensure that beef farmers in Northern Ireland as well as in the Republic of Ireland can take advantage of the potential value conveyed by having the proposed PGI status. At this point, the most important next step will be to reach an agreement with the DAFM Minister that any application to register 'Irish Grass-fed Beef' would be as a joint all-island PGI. I am unaware of any legal advice the DAFM has received.

My Departmental officials, as well as the Livestock & Meat Commission, are engaging with both Bord Bia and DAFM officials on the matter.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the work his Department is undertaking in developing a climate change bill. (AQO 871/17-22)

Mr Poots: It is imperative that we build the evidence base and ensure government policy making has climate and environment at its core and that future policies and strategies can demonstrably deliver the outcomes people expect. We need to fully understand the unique characteristics on the makeup of Northern Ireland emissions and determine what our equitable contribution to Net Zero is. This is why I have written to the independent expert UK Committee on Climate Change for advice on what would be our equitable contribution to the UK's net zero emissions target, to ensure our emissions reduction targets are credible and evidence-based. Unfortunately the Committee on Climate Change are not in a position to respond to my request until after they have provided advice on the UK's sixth carbon budget, which will be published in December 2020. In the interim, my officials have provided me with proposals on an options appraisal for a Climate Change Bill in Northern Ireland. I will consider those options along with the advice provided from the Committee on Climate Change and will present my findings to the Northern Ireland Executive to agree a way forward.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, to ensure compliance with the Official Controls (Animals, Feed and Food) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019, whether he has made provision for the inspection of Designated Border Control Posts by EU Commission officials. (AQO 872/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department will make arrangements to comply with Article 59 of the Official Controls Regulations 2017/625, in order to ensure that controls can be performed by Commission experts in accordance with Article 116.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given the cross-cutting nature of the proposals, whether the decision on a marine licence for the Islandmagee Gas Storage Project will be made by the Executive. (AQO 873/17-22)

Mr Poots: The application for a marine construction licence in relation to the proposed gas storage project at Islandmagee is being considered by officials in DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division. The other required DAERA consents to abstract and discharge water are also under review. Due to the strategic nature of the proposed Islandmagee project, the award or withholding of these consents will be subject to my decision.

My officials are currently working through the determinations. Once I have seen this material, I will consider whether there is a need to refer the decision to the Executive Committee in line with section 2.4 of the Ministerial Code and the Executive Committee (Functions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given the integrated nature of the fisheries industry on the island, what engagement he is having with his counterpart in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. (AQO 874/17-22)

Mr Poots: A new Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine was appointed on 2 September this year. I have not yet had the opportunity to meet Mr McConalogue but I spoke to him by phone shortly after he took office and intend to meet him at a mutually suitable time in the months to come.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to develop legislation to update the Rats and Mice (Destruction) Act 1919. (AQO 875/17-22)

Mr Poots: This legislation is not within my Department's remit.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how much has been raised by the Carrier Bag Levy since it came into operation in 2013.

(AQO 877/17-22)

Mr Poots: Since it came into operation in 2013, £32.87 million has been received in respect of the Carrier Bag Levy in Northern Ireland.

Year	Proceeds of Levy (million)
2013-2014	4.17
2014-2015	4.6
2015-2016	5.2
2016-2017	5
2017-2018	4.9
2018-2019	4.6
2019-2020	4.4

Department for Communities

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities whether she will examine the allocation of seats to attend council meetings in person made by Mid and East Antrim Council, having account to the d'Hondt principle and any other equitable means of distribution.

(AQW 7036/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): The Department brought forward the Local Government (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of District Council Meetings) Regulations (NI) 2020 to provide for councillors to remotely attend council meetings during the current emergency period.

Those regulations also amended the Local Government Act (NI) 2014 (the 2014 Act) to ensure there would be no detriment to those councillors who take part in proceedings remotely. Regardless of whether a member attends a meeting in person or via remote means, their speaking rights and voting rights should be the same.

Whilst the Department is responsible for the legislative framework regarding council meetings, the conduct of meetings is regulated by Standing Orders made by the Council under section 38 of the 2014 Act. Similarly, the allocation of the numbers and persons who may take their seats physically in the Council Chamber during meetings is a matter for councils.

Where a council is considered to have acted improperly, this may be brought to the attention of the Public Services Ombudsman and any consideration of a council's duty under section 75, would be a matter for the Equality Commission.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities to detail the cost to her Department of renting private buildings in town and city centres, in each year since 2015.

(AQW 7261/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The majority of the NICS Office Estate is sourced through and managed by the Department of Finance's Properties Division. The Department therefore currently has only a small number of leased properties: 3 in Belfast, 1 in Omagh and 1 in Moira.

The Department for Communities was established in May 2016. Details of rental costs per each financial year since the Department was established are as follows:

16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20
£1,036,901	£1,097,915	£1,373,416	£1,349,357

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the current housing stock in (i) the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and (ii) each housing association broken, down by constituency.

(AQW 7466/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive have provided the table at (i) below detailing the current housing stock broken down by Parliamentary Constituency.

Information on housing stock for Housing Associations is only held by council area and the figures provided at (ii) are for Year ending March 2019 as these figures are only provided to the department as part of the Regulation of Registered Housing Associations at the end of September 2019.

(i) **Housing Executive**

Parliamentary Constituency	Total
Belfast East	5413
Belfast North	9085
Belfast South	5258
Belfast West	8981
East Antrim	3829
East Derry	4506
Fermanagh South Tyrone	3177
Foyle	6486
Lagan Valley	4342
Mid Ulster	2618
Newry & Armagh	3882
North Antrim	4722
North Down	3063
South Antrim	3653
South Down	2649
Strangford	4082
Upper Bann	5042
West Tyrone	3780
Total	84568

(ii) **Housing Associations**

RHA	Antrim and Newtownabbey	Ards and North Down	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	Belfast City	Causeway Coast and Glens	Derry City and Strabane	Fermanagh and Omagh	Lisburn and Castlereagh City	Mid & East Antrim	Mid Ulster	Newry, Mourne & Down	Totals
Abbeyfield & Wesley	54	52	17	70	0	26	0	0	64	0	10	293
Alpha	124	213	68	213	54	0	30	133	78	45	1	959
Apex	87	25	9	716	298	3333	261	76	66	400	246	5517
Ark	11	110	0	236	15	0	10	14	9	0	48	453
Choice	351	902	535	4750	194	748	288	1006	639	134	763	10310
Clanmil	398	526	210	1963	174	188	109	365	283	533	266	5015
Connswater	134	138	0	551	0	0	0	286	0	0	0	1109
Covenanter	0	0	0	0	27	0	0	0	0	0	0	27
Craigowen	0	78	0	0	0	0	59	0	0	0	92	229
Grove	0	0	0	218	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	218
Habinteg	95	136	52	684	86	874	33	131	77	129	117	2414
Newington	0	0	0	705	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	705
NICHA												0
North Belfast	2	3	0	994	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	1004
Radius	846	1262	627	5362	608	728	415	1554	757	51	714	12924
Rural	2	24	50	0	20	87	136	4	16	15	141	495

RHA	Antrim and Newtownabbey	Ards and North Down	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	Belfast City	Causeway Coast and Glens	Derry City and Strabane	Fermanagh and Omagh	Lisburn and Castlereagh City	Mid & East Antrim	Mid Ulster	Newry, Mourne & Down	Totals
South Ulster	0	45	837	7	0	2	1	98	0	23	214	1227
St Matthews	0	0	0	211	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	211
Triangle	26	37	35	179	350	20	20	75	203	70	28	1043
Woodvale & Shankill	0	0	0	445	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	445
TOTAL By Council Area	2130	3551	2440	17304	1826	6006	1362	3742	2197	1400	2640	44598

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities to detail her Department's position on advocating for the benefits of a community development approach to addressing disadvantage (i) across Government departments; (ii) at local council level in partnership with the community and voluntary sector.

(AQW 7555/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Communities advocates for a community development approach to addressing disadvantage through a number of different mechanisms involving local and central government in partnership with the community and voluntary sector. Key initiatives include: People and Place, A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and its associated funding programme; the delivery of the Community Support Programme in partnership with local government and the promotion of community planning under the Department's responsibility for local government policy.

Councils are responsible for co-ordinating Community Planning for their district. The skills and knowledge of the community and voluntary sector have been to the fore in working with government departments and council colleagues during the pandemic. This approach will be built into planning for the recovery.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities when she will set the energy retention standards for public sector homes; and when she will introduce a detailed and costed plan to upgrade all Northern Ireland Housing Executive homes to the set standard.

(AQW 7735/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Energy retention or efficiency standards for homes in all tenures are not set by my Department but are included in Building Regulations. DAERA are currently leading on an 'Energy Efficiency Strategy' in terms of 'Climate Change' and DfE are leading on an 'Energy Strategy'. My department will continue to follow any guidance that comes from these strategies and likewise any amendments to the regulations to ensure that all new build social housing is built to the appropriate energy standard.

The Housing Executive currently seeks to upgrade the energy efficiency of its stock through a number of measures including modern heating systems, insulation, double glazing and – where special funding has been available – the installation of cladding and solar panels. Building Regulations requirements regarding thermal performance are complied with whenever undertaking renovation works.

The Housing Executive are currently developing a new Energy Strategy and in the course of doing so have prepared some initial estimates of the cost of achieving the higher Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) bands; these range from £394 million for low SAP rating C to £1.7 billion for low SAP rating A.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what her Department can do to address the Housing Executive's waiting lists for North Down.

(AQW 7770/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In terms of new social homes in the North Down Parliamentary Constituency I have been advised by the Housing Executive that there have been 76 social housing units completed to date in 2020/21, with a further 11 social housing units currently under construction.

There are 32 new social housing units programmed to start through the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) between 2020/21 and 2022/23.

I am committed to delivering on the commitments within the "New Decade, New Approach" and will be taking steps to protect existing Housing Executive homes for future generations by actively progressing solutions to tackle the investment challenge faced. I will be laying out my plans very soon to commence a process of revitalisation which will address the very significant investment challenge the Housing Executive faces.

I am also keen to now progress the 'Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations' by publishing a consultation report that not only details stakeholder views but that importantly provides a clear way forward and includes an implementation plan.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities how many applications for home ownership were submitted in the Upper Bann constituency in each of the last two financial years.

(AQW 7809/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Answer

The following information has been provided by the Co-Ownership Housing Association:

Applications for home ownership in Upper Bann Constituency

Financial Year	Number of Applications Received	Number Applications Completed
2018/19	205	170
2019/20	141	124

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many households, not entitled to top-up payments, are affected by the bedroom tax.

(AQW 7813/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that as of 9th September 2020 the number of its tenants who have lost entitlement to Welfare Supplementary Payments, and are therefore affected by the Social Sector Size Criteria, is 170 (Belfast: 76; South Region: 34; and North Region: 60 households).

In addition, the Federation of Housing Association estimates that 57 Housing Association tenants have lost entitlement to Welfare Supplementary Payments, bringing the total number of tenants affected by the Social Sector Size Criteria to approximately 227.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Communities (i) what consideration her Department has given to the development of a crime preventative package for places of worship; and (ii) what engagement her Department has had with (a) the PSNI; (b) the Department of Justice; (c) the Executive Office with regard to attacks on places of worship and developing a package of support for places of worship that are impacted.

(AQW 7921/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I share the member's concerns on this issue, however, my Department does not have the policy remit to consider the introduction of a crime preventative package for places of worship. Matters of security are for the Department of Justice and their associated bodies.

My Department has previously received correspondence on this issue, which has been shared with The Department of Justice for further consideration, as well as with the Executive Office which is the lead department for Good Relations and the implementation of the Race Equality Strategy 2015-2025.

In recognition of this problem, my Department has facilitated discussions between the faith sector and the Department of Justice via the Community Faith Forum. The Forum, which is funded by my Department, provides a platform for engagement between the faith sector and officials across Departments. Officials from the Department of Justice Crime and Community Safety Branch engaged with the Forum in December 2019 when attacks on places of worship was discussed and members took the opportunity to feed their thoughts on addressing these issues. Further engagement is planned in November.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities when she intends to announce her considerations on the consultation of a Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations; and whether she intends to remove intimidation points from the selection scheme.

(AQW 8142/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am actively considering proposals raised by this Review and as you may be aware, I have already made my views known on the matter of intimidation points. I do not intend to proceed with the proposal to remove intimidation points, I instead want to consider it from another angle and ensure that they are there for those who really need them. I also intend to tighten the verification process for the award of points.

The Review contains 19 other proposals which also require consideration. Progress has been affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during which I have updated Executive colleagues and the Communities Committee.

I am keen to progress the Review by publishing a consultation report that not only details stakeholder views but that importantly provides a clear way forward and includes an implementation plan. I anticipate publication of the report later in the autumn.

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Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities (i) for her assessment of the awarding of intimidation points; and (ii) whether she intends to remove the awarding of intimidation points from the Housing Selection Scheme.

(AQW 8143/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am actively considering proposals raised by the Fundamental Review of Allocations and as you may be aware, have already made my views known on the matter of intimidation points. I do not intend to proceed with the proposal to remove intimidation points, I instead want to consider it from another angle and ensure that they are there for those who really need them.

I believe that it is unacceptable that other victims who have suffered trauma or violence, for example, victims of domestic abuse, are not treated with the same priority as those who currently receive intimidation points. I am currently considering how to address this.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the funding provided for affordable housing in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8156/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Affordable Housing is an umbrella term used to describe both intermediate and social rented housing. The following funding has been provided for affordable housing in each of the last five years.

Social Rented Housing

Financial Year	Funding Amount
2015/16	£101 million
2016/17	£106 million
2017/18	£110 million
2018/19	£121 million
2019/20	£146 million

Intermediate Housing

Financial Year	Funding Amount
2015/16	£102.5 million
2016/17	£9.2 million
2017/18	£4.5 million
2018/19	£14.7 million
2019/20	£34 million

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the support package being made available for musicians and freelancers within the additional financial package for the arts sector.

(AQW 8196/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The £29m package is not directed solely at the arts but will provide a much needed lifeline and significant boost across our culture, language, arts and heritage sectors, which have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

Given the breadth and depth of the need it is my intention that the programmes being created should be open to as wide as possible a range of individuals and organisations across these sectors, which will include musicians and freelancers.

Information on the new funding schemes including eligibility, application process and guidance will be announced shortly.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities what support her Department has given to the Independent Advice sector; and what measures she is putting in place to ensure they receive ongoing adequate support.

(AQW 8221/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: During the current crisis the independent advice sector has been critical in providing support and reassurance to people right across our communities. The Covid-19 Community Helpline, established by Deirdre Hargey and operated by Advice NI, was the gateway into community services and it remains in place, fully funded by my Department.

My Department has allocated direct financial support of more than £6.5 million for 2020/21 to support over 360 jobs in the Advice Sector to deliver independent community based advice services to citizens. We have taken steps to ensure that there is full funding flexibility to allow for redirection of budget in the current context where levels of take up and methods of delivery of advice are changing.

To respond to the predicted need for additional debt advice due to the economic impacts being experienced by many, the Department has allocated additional funding of £383,000 for the provision of free debt advice for citizens here through Advice NI, working in partnership with their front line advice providers.

I am committed to ensuring the continued provision of free, good quality, independent, community based advice services to meet the needs of everyone in our community who needs it, both in these very difficult times and in our recovery and as part of our approach to tackling poverty.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities what alternative accommodation arrangements are being explored to reconvene face-to face oral hearings for Personal Independence Payments and Attendance Allowance in Upper Bann.
(AQW 8223/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is currently assessing a number of venues for suitability to resume face to face oral hearings for all benefit appeal types.

In the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area, Armagh Business Centre, the Jethro Centre in Lurgan, Craigavon Civic Centre and Marlborough House in Craigavon are venues which will be assessed for suitability for face to face hearings in line with government guidance on social distancing requirements.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of Personal Independence Payment claims which fall within the scope of her Department's decision to mirror the Department for Work and Pensions' decision to implement the Supreme Court Judgement known as MM.
(AQW 8242/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has implemented the Supreme Court Judgement known as MM on all PIP claims assessed after 17 September 2020. We will also be undertaking an exercise in due course to check whether people in receipt of PIP will benefit as a result of this judgment. Anyone whose PIP award is to change will receive payments backdated to the effective date in each individual case. They will be contacted directly and there is no need for people to actively contact the Department.

Information on the number of cases to be reviewed is not yet available. The Department Work and Pensions, whose IT system is used to administer PIP, will commission a data scan of the PIP system to identify all the cases that could potentially be impacted by the judgement. Information on cases here will be passed to my Department to carry out the review.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Communities what support her Department is putting in place to alleviate the financial pressures on those in the music industry, as a result of the decision to regulate against live music due to the pandemic.
(AQW 8362/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise the significant impact that current restrictions are having on those in the music industry. I have welcomed the £29m allocation from the Executive which will provide support across the broad arts, language, culture and heritage sectors.

My officials are engaging with partners across central and local government, as well as arm's length bodies and sectoral representatives to ensure the funding is distributed quickly, fairly and to maximise its impact. Work on the programme of support is well advanced and details of the new funding schemes, including guidance, eligibility and application information will be available shortly.

Given the breadth and depth of the need it is my intention that the programmes being created should be open to as wide as possible a range of individuals and organisations across these sectors, which will include those working within the music industry.

This fund is in addition to the £5.5m Creative Support Fund previously established by my Department.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what action she has taken to ensure Coronavirus regulations are observed at sporting events.
(AQW 8432/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for ensuring that Coronavirus Regulations are observed at sports events rests in the first instance with the event organisers and relevant Sports Governing Bodies.

In May of this year Sport NI published a 'Framework for a Return to Sport' that has been used by sports Governing Bodies to develop their own protocols for a safe return to sporting events for both participants and spectators.

My Department also established a Return to Sport Expert Group made up of medical and scientific professionals with a sports background, to provide advice to Governing Bodies on their detailed protocols. The Department has recently set up a Working Group to look at developing a range of measures to facilitate the safe return of more spectators when the time is right. The Group includes key stakeholders including representatives from SportNI, the Sports Ground Safety Authority, District Councils, and sports Governing Bodies. The primary aim of the Working Group is to share learning, reinforce safety messaging and refine the measures in place to provide a safe and Covid compliant environment at sporting events, cognisant of the evolving Covid restrictions and Executive decisions.

My Department is committed to working with other Government Departments, Sport NI, the Sports Ground Safety Authority, District Councils, Governing Bodies and clubs to ensure that everyone can continue to enjoy their sport of choice in a safe environment in line with Executive guidelines and Public Health Regulations.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of applicants on the social housing waiting list, broken down by each of the areas in East Belfast.
(AQW 8435/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the following table which details the number of applicants on the social housing waiting list, broken down by each of the areas in East Belfast. This shows the position at the end of September 2020.

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Needs Assessment Area	Applicants (Total)	Applicants in Housing Stress	Allocations to Applicants
Belfast East	Dundonald Small Estates	20	12	11
Belfast East/South*	Dundonald Urban	278	195	51
	Inner East Belfast*	548	395	103
	Middle East Belfast*	798	542	112
	Outer East Belfast*	640	419	54
	Short Strand	76	62	<10
Grand Total		2360	1625	-

Department of Education

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) when the contract for C2k was due for renewal; (ii) what extensions have been granted to this; (iii) when tenders for a new contract will be issued; and (iv) when schools can expect to be in receipt of the new service.

(AQW 7614/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The current Education Network(NI) (EA(NI)) contract began in April 2012 initially for five years with an option to extend by two years through to 31 March 2019. This was subsequently extended to March 2021 with business case approval.

An addendum to extend the 2019 business case is being developed to further extend the current contract until 31 March 2022. This includes options to extend the contract initially to 30 September 2022 and then to 31 March 2023 to support transition to the new service.

I am advised that the Education Authority (EA) will seek to begin procurement of replacement services in 2021, subject to business case approval. My officials are currently considering the business case which will also need Department of Finance approval.

EA is planning to have core services in place for September 2022 with transition ongoing until March 2023 and beyond where ongoing needs are identified.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of whether it is safe for teachers who were previously shielding to now work in classrooms; and to detail the reasons for this assessment.

(AQW 7639/17-22)

Mr Weir: An updated version of the 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for schools and educational settings in Northern Ireland' was published on 29 September 2020.

Section 6 of this guidance provides the position on staff who were previously shielding stating that "The latest advice recommends that clinically extremely vulnerable individuals who are unable to work from home can now return to the work place subject to risk assessment. The employee can be accompanied by a trade union representative or colleague to discuss individual risk assessments".

The guidance has been informed by advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail how the £0.2 million funding allocated for Special Education will be utilised.
(AQW 7780/17-22)

Mr Weir: The additional £0.2m Covid-19 funding for Special Educational Needs (SEN) Support will be directed towards the following services: Autism Advisory and Intervention; Language and Communication; SEN Inclusion; and Literacy and

Behaviour Support. This funding aims to address increased caseloads as a result of Covid-19, facilitating more young people accessing these services in a timely manner.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education whether additional staffing and pupil support are included in the additional allocation of funding provided for schools.

(AQW 7874/17-22)

Mr Weir: To help support schools address many of the new pressures arising as a result of Covid-19, and to assist education settings to continue to provide a safe learning environment for our children and young people, I outlined a significant package of funding for the first term of the academic year.

This package included: £17.5 million towards the cost of substitute teachers for existing staff absences specifically as a result of Covid-19, non-teaching staff and other school expenditure beyond teacher substitution costs; £6.4 million for PPE; £5 million for school wellbeing initiatives; £3.1 million for home to school transport; and £1.4 million to support special educational needs.

In addition, I launched the Engage programme on 23 September 2020 to support pupils in re-engaging with learning following the prolonged period of school closures. £11.2 million has been set aside in the current financial year for the Engage programme to enable all primary and post primary schools to provide additional teaching support for pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education (i) whether the temporary removal of transfer tests scores from post-primary admissions criteria is a significant change; (ii) what contingencies are in place if it is not possible to administer transfer tests; and (iii) what support is in place for candidates who experience disruption to school-based learning.

(AQW 7905/17-22)

Mr Weir: Admissions criteria are a matter for individual Boards of Governors, however, I am aware that a number of post primary schools have decided to temporarily remove academic selection from their admission criteria for 2020/21. Due to the temporary nature of their decision and taking account of the current difficult circumstances that schools are operating in, created by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the potential impact on the children who will be applying to attend these schools, the issues raised were not considered to be of such significance to require a Development Proposal.

Should the tests be impacted because of wider public health concerns, it will be a matter for individual Boards of Governors in those schools that use the scores from the tests in their admissions criteria to decide what alternative criteria they may wish to use.

The disruption of recent months has been felt by pupils across Northern Ireland. I am aware that every child and young person will have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic uniquely. As schools have reopened across Northern Ireland, the emphasis has been on ensuring children have good emotional health and wellbeing, are engaged and motivated to learn and have the tools and skills they require for learning.

The "Engage" programme aims to limit any long-term adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on learning by supporting the learning and engagement of pupils through provision of high quality one to one, small group or team teaching support in every school in Northern Ireland. This support is for all children regardless of whether they take the transfer test or not.

Additionally, I have also provided funding for the purchase of online virtual learning resources for children in Year 7 to help with literacy and numeracy skills.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 7133/17-22, to detail (i) how some applications failed when others were approved as they are all from one geographical location; (ii) , of those who were rejected, what his Department has put in place to ensure that those children have access to transport to and from school; and (iii) how many approvals were based on an appeal.

(AQW 7929/17-22)

Mr Weir: All transport applications are assessed in accordance with the Department of Education Circular 1996/41. Pupils are assessed as eligible for transport assistance on the basis of two criteria: the qualifying walking distance and suitable school. The qualifying walking distance is 2 miles for primary and 3 miles for post-primary pupils and is measured as the nearest route capable of being walked between a pupil's home and their school.

While pupils may live close to each other, they may have applied for different schools in different school categories which could impact their eligibility and so there will be occasions where pupils living close to each other receive different outcomes to their applications.

The responsibility for a child's journey to and from school lies with each child's parents unless the criteria for home to school transport provision are met. The home to school transport policy is in place to facilitate the attendance of pupils at school and it does so by ensuring that each child either lives within the statutory walking distance of at least one school in their chosen school category or is eligible for home to school transport assistance. The statutory walking distances are two miles for primary aged pupils and three miles for post-primary pupils.

The Education Authority has advised that no applications for transport assistance were approved following a formal appeal since 2017-18. Six applications in 2018-19 and eight applications in 2019-20 were initially turned down by the online application process and subsequently granted following further assessment of the circumstances prior to a formal appeal being instigated.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what social distancing or bubble measures are being applied to centres where the transfer tests are being undertaken in January 2021.

(AQW 7961/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not play a role in the administration or operation of the transfer tests including where they are held. It is the responsibility of the two private test providers and the host schools to ensure that appropriate safety arrangements and social distancing measures are put in place within the test centres and that the Chief Medical Officer's and Public Health Authority advice is followed. I understand the test providers are liaising with the host schools around health and safety arrangements for the days of the tests.

However, officials have asked to be kept informed of the providers' plans to ensure they align with guidance issued by the Department.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what engagement his Department has had with (i) GL Assessment; and (ii) Association for Quality Education Ltd regarding safety arrangements and centre capacity given COVID-19 guidelines.

(AQW 7962/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not play a role in the administration or operation of the transfer tests including where they are held. It is the responsibility of the two private test providers and the host schools to ensure that appropriate safety arrangements and social distancing measures are put in place within the test centres and that the Chief Medical Officer's and Public Health Authority advice is followed. I understand the test providers are liaising with the host schools around health and safety arrangements for the days of the tests.

However, officials have asked to be kept informed of the providers' plans to ensure they align with guidance issued by the Department.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of times he has appeared before his Statutory Committee since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7981/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have appeared 14 times before the Education Committee since the restoration of devolution.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of appearances he has made since the restoration of devolution (i) before the Assembly; and (ii) before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.

(AQW 7982/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have made the following appearances before the NI Assembly:

- (i) 5 Statements to the NI Assembly
- (ii) 4 appearances before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of written assembly questions his Department has answered since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7984/17-22)

Mr Weir: Between 11 January 2020 and 1 October 2020 the Department for Education received and responded to 888 written Assembly Questions cases.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education (i) what guidance and support is available from his Department in relation to the safe resumption of youth work services in Northern Ireland; and (ii) what resources have been allocated to assist youth service providers in this regard.

(AQW 8079/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Under the governance arrangements for Education Restart, the Education Authority (EA) are leading on the Youth Restart. In addition to my Department's guidance on safe working in education settings, the EA has published specific and comprehensive guidance for the sector which is available on the Youth Online website - www.youthonline.org.uk. Where there are questions on specific issues that emerge from the sector, they are considered by EA, where necessary PHA advice is sought, and answers are widely disseminated.

The guidance provides the framework for the sector to move towards a full resumption of services in line with the Northern Ireland Assembly 5 step strategy. Currently the EA is advising that they are at step 3 of that process.

- (ii) £4.4m is being made available to the youth sector by the EA through four additional funding schemes which focus on Local Youth Restart (£2.264m); Emotional Health and Wellbeing (£1.5m), and support for Regional Youth Restart Membership and Regional Youth Restart Projects (£654k).

In addition and in recognition of additional costs incurred to ensure the safe opening of youth services, my department has allocated funding of £1.381m to the EA in respect of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for the youth sector and an additional £38k, with a further small allocation yet to be made, for water cleansing in youth clubs.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what contingencies he has put in place to protect pupils of Oakwood, Glenveagh, Harberton and Fleming Fulton Special Educational Needs Schools, who share buses, against community transmission of COVID-19.

(AQW 8084/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's current New School Day guidance is clear that protective bubbles should be applied with consistency, however pupils may form more than one bubble. This allows for the effective creation of a bubble on the EA vehicles and this is not diminished by it including pupils from other schools.

The guidance references a range of mitigating measures that are put in place on all home to school transport to minimise the risks. This includes the clear message that parents should only use home to school transport where there is no alternative available for their child's journey to school and that no child should travel to school if they have any symptoms of COVID-19. There are also additional mitigations that the EA has put in place for travel on its vehicles including ensuring pupils usually occupy the same seats resulting in a consistent and small number of pupils in close proximity to each other, provision of hand sanitiser on its buses, personal protective equipment being provided to drivers and escorts and the regular cleaning of vehicles.

The New School Day guidance was prepared following detailed engagement with the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Advisor and the Public Health Agency.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how many children are currently waiting on an appointment with an education psychologist, broken down by council area.

(AQW 8085/17-22)

Mr Weir: As of the 30 September, 1842 children are currently waiting to receive a Psychology assessment, at any stage of the Code of Practice. This information is not held by council area.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how many appointments with an education psychologist were cancelled between March 2020 – June 2020, broken down by council area.

(AQW 8086/17-22)

Mr Weir: From 23 March 2020 to 10 September 2020, 699 appointments were deferred, not cancelled, depending on the individual child circumstances. Those requiring face to face assessment were deferred to the start of the new academic year and will be picked up in due course. The information is not held by council area.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 7486/17-22 (i) to detail the rationale for requesting the specific amounts of (a) £15 million in 2020/21; (b) £30 million in 2021/22; and (c) £45 million in 2022/23 for the development and implementation of the Executive's Childcare Strategy, including the early education and childcare offer; and (ii) whether the business case underpinning these bids will be published.

(AQW 8101/17-22)

Mr Weir: The costs associated with the Childcare Strategy and profile of expenditure will be dependent on Executive decisions regarding its scope, scale and the pace of implementation.

The bid of £15m in the first year, rising to £45m by year 3 is an estimate of the likely requirement, based on internal scoping work carried out to date on the development, implementation and ongoing operational costs associated with current draft actions. A business case to support agreed actions will be developed in due course.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Education what advice his Department is providing schools to assist with planning for the half-term break, including the provision of free school meals.

(AQW 8128/17-22)

Mr Weir: Significant support has been provided to schools to help them manage the COVID-19 pandemic including access to Education Authority Link Officers, an EA helpline and a Public Health Agency dedicated schools phone line. The Department has published comprehensive guidance for schools as well as a flowchart setting out the steps schools should take to manage a positive case; posters for schools and a leaflet for parents.

It is recognised that holiday periods can be a difficult time for families, however, the current legislation is very clear that school meals are only provided to pupils in attendance at school i.e. during term time. The Coronavirus Act 2020 allowed for modification of this legislation during a time of emergency. Normal Halloween and Christmas breaks are not considered

an emergency under the Coronavirus Act. My Department has no legislative power to provide support for food outside the Coronavirus pandemic (and only if schools are closed to children due to the pandemic). Therefore, at present, there are no plans to provide additional funding during the half term break in respect of free school meals.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail his Department's spend on addressing educational underachievement, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 8135/17-22)

Mr Weir: One of my Department's six Corporate Goals is "Raising standards and tackling underachievement to ensure learners get the best possible education". Significant investment is made annually in support of a suite of policies, interventions and programmes which help to address educational underachievement, including those with a particular focus on targeting disadvantage.

A breakdown of related expenditure to date across the last 5 years is outlined in the tables below.

Table 1: Resource Expenditure

DE intervention / programme	Funding 2016/17 (£000)	Funding 2017/18 (£000)	Funding 2018/19 (£000)	Funding 2019/20 (£000)	Funding 2020/21 (£000)
Targeting Social Need (TSN) funding (distributed to schools as part of core budgets through application of the Common Funding Formula)	£77,577	£77,735	£76,787	£76,421	£75,303
*Sure Start Programme	£25,000	£25,000	£25,500	£25,500	£27,400
Extended Schools	£10,653	£9,153	£9,153	£9,153	£9,153
Youth Service	£3,764	£3,764	£3,764	£3,764	£3,764 see note 1
Early Years Pathway Fund	£3,000	£3,000	£3,000	£3,000	£3,000
Nurture Groups	£2,250	£2,250	£2,250	£2,250	£3,550
Pre-school Education Programme	£1,546	£1,434	£1,533	£1,535	£1,620 see note 2
Bright Start (SAC) Grant Scheme	£1,626	£1,660	£1,163	£1,100	£1,100
Key Stage 2/3 Literacy and Numeracy Project	£897	£900	£900	£155	N/A
Full Service Extended Schools Programme (North Belfast)	£385	£385	£385	£385	£385
Full Service Community Network (West Belfast)	£385	£385	£385	£385	£385
Toybox Project	£356	£356	£356	£356	£356
Sharing the Learning Programme	£200	£200	£200	£200	£200
Extended Services Funding	£155	£136	£133	£133	£133
West Belfast Community Project	£80	£80	£80	£80	£80
North Belfast Primary Principals Support Programme	N/A	N/A	N/A	£250	£250
Total	£127,874	£126,438	£125,589	£124,667	£126,679

*Sure Start -note that total yearly allocations provided (rounded to nearest £100k) - full spend presumed.

Note 1 - From 2020/21 a single allocation of youth funding has been made that includes provision of TSN funding.

Note 2 - Budget figure for 2020/21, actual figure not known until after school census.

Table 2: Early Years Capital Expenditure

	Capital expenditure 2016/17 (£000)	Capital expenditure 2017/18 (£000)	Capital expenditure 2018/19 (£000)	Capital expenditure 2019/20 (£000)	Capital expenditure 2020/21 (£000)
Early Years Sector Capital	£325	£462	£34	£153	£472

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what is the longest period of time that a pupil has been waiting for an appointment with an education psychologist.

(AQW 8147/17-22)

Mr Weir: The longest period of time that a pupil has been waiting for an appointment with an education psychologist during the last quarter July – September 2020 is 43 weeks, as advised by the Education Authority Educational Psychology Service.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what is the average waiting time for a pupil to get an appointment with an education psychologist.

(AQW 8148/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority have advised that the average waiting time for a pupil to get an appointment with an educational psychologist was 11.29 weeks during the quarter July to September 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how many pupils who had appointments with education psychologist cancelled between 20th March and 20th June 2020, are currently waiting in each council area.

(AQW 8149/17-22)

Mr Weir: From 23 March 2020 to 10 September 2020, 699 appointments were deferred, not cancelled, depending on the individual child circumstances. Those requiring face to face assessment were deferred to the start of the new academic year and will be picked up in due course. The information is not held by council area.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education when CCEA is expected to publish their proposals for examinations in 2021.

(AQW 8152/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 9 October, I informed CCEA of my decisions in relation to a range of changes to CCEA GCSE, AS and A level qualifications that are due to be awarded in the 2020/21 academic year. CCEA will now work with centres to provide more information at centre level as quickly as possible.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education for an update on when CCEA will decide GCSE courses.

(AQW 8203/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 9 October, I informed CCEA of my decisions in relation to a range of changes to CCEA GCSE qualifications, as well as AS and A level qualifications that are due to be awarded in the 2020/21 academic year. CCEA will now work with centres to provide more information at centre level as quickly as possible.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on a purpose built youth centre for Strabane town.

(AQW 8217/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) continues to develop a business case for future youth service provision for young people within the catchment area of Strabane. The business case will consider all options for improved accommodation that will provide suitable youth facilities for future provision that is currently not available in Strabane.

A number of options are being considered and are currently being costed. These will identify the most suitable site for development. Once complete the business case will be submitted for review by my Department.

In recognition that there is currently no full-time controlled or voluntary youth provision in the Strabane Town Centre or surrounding areas of Sperrin and Derg to meet the needs of children and young people in the area, the EA is prioritising actions to secure statutory full time provision and to develop the capacity of the voluntary sector to deliver effective youth work including the deployment of an effective work force development strategy.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education (i) what grounds dictated the differential between examiners and moderators employed annually by the CCEA to examine and moderate GCSE and A level papers and that of substitute teachers, in light of lost earnings due to COVID-19 restrictions in 2020; and (ii) to determine what steps his Department is taking to ensure that examiners and moderators are available and willing to mark potential GCSE and A level papers in 2021 given the failure to remunerate them for the 2020 missed exams.

(AQW 8231/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The Income Support Scheme for Substitute Teachers was agreed by the Executive in recognition of the unique position existing in Northern Ireland (NI). The scheme enabled NI substitute teachers to be treated in a similar way to their counterparts in all other UK jurisdictions and addressed the immediate impact that the closure of schools had on the primary income of these individuals. One of the criteria for the scheme was that retired teachers in receipt of any teacher's pension were not eligible to apply for payment. This was in recognition that these individuals would already have an alternative income via their pension.

Examiners and moderators are education professionals, including current and retired teachers, who are engaged by CCEA to deliver work for exams on a 'contract for services' basis. There was no central approach to the issue of compensation payments to exam contractors across the UK and each awarding organisation had to look at their own specific arrangements and circumstances when making a decision on the issue. While exam contractors in NI have already been paid for the work they have delivered under their current contracts, any compensation payment for lost earnings would be a non-contractual payment. As the Department has a responsibility to ensure that public money is used in the most appropriate manner, and given the accompanying legal advice on this issue, a non-contractual compensatory payment could not be justified in these circumstances.

- (ii) On Friday 9 October 2020, I announced my decisions in relation to arrangements for examinations in 2020/21. I am conscious that the public health situation remains fluid and CCEA has therefore been commissioned to develop contingency arrangements to respond to a range of public health scenarios that might arise. However, my priority is to enable public examinations to take place this academic year, if at all possible, as this is the most valid and reliable measure of educational outcomes available.

The Department understands the importance of, and is extremely grateful for, the vital role that examiners and moderators play in this process. We recognise that it has been an exceptionally difficult year for them and understand that they will be very disappointed about the decision on compensation payments. The cancellation of exams this year was due to a situation that was beyond anyone's control. It is hoped that examiners and moderators will remain committed to working with CCEA to deliver a high quality examinations system for the benefit of all our children and young people.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will be offering financial support to the childcare sector in order to ensure their sustainability in the time ahead.

(AQW 8257/17-22)

Mr Weir: To date, no funding has been allocated to my Department for the childcare sector for the period September 2020 onwards.

However, officials are engaging with childcare sector representatives and other stakeholders, to gather evidence on the issues facing the sector and consider what, if any, financial support may be required if further funding is made available.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Education whether his Department carried out a Rural Needs Impact Assessment in relation to recent nurture unit funding allocations.

(AQW 8260/17-22)

Mr Weir: Officials in my Department are currently developing the necessary business case for approval for implementation. A Rural Needs Impact Assessment will be considered as part of that process.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Education what his Department is doing to ensure that young people are educated around the issue of sexual violence and the services available to support victims.

(AQW 8290/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schools currently teach pupils about domestic & sexual violence and abuse under Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) which is part of the statutory curriculum and covered under Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary school level and Learning for Life and Work at post-primary school level.

Teachers also have access to a range of curricular guidance and teaching support materials on this subject via the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's Relationships and Sexuality Education Hub. The Hub signposts teachers, parents/carers and pupils to local organisations which can offer confidential advice and support to children and young people, and families.

The hub can be accessed at <https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse>.

Schools remain best placed to make decisions about which approaches and resources to use to address the needs of their children and young people.

My Department's guidance entitled, 'Safeguarding and Child Protection – a Guide for Schools' also provides advice regarding domestic and sexual violence and abuse. This can be found in section 8.2 of the following link:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/safeguarding-and-child-protection-schools-guide-schools>

In addition to this, we are also working collaboratively with the Departments of Health and Justice and other key delivery partners to implement the actions pertaining to education within the 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland Strategy'. These actions focus on commitments relating to the areas of prevention and intervention.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what support will be given to examiners who have been contracted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but have been unable to fulfil any work.
(AQW 8308/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department understands the importance of, and is extremely grateful for, the vital role that contractors play in the exams process. While some examiners did receive payment for the work they had delivered under their contracts for the 2020 exams series, any compensation payment for lost earnings would be a non-contractual payment. On the basis of the legal advice received and Managing Public Money considerations, it was decided that a non-contractual compensatory payment could not be justified in these circumstances.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education to detail the extra funding supplied to schools in West Belfast to tackle COVID-19.
(AQW 8312/17-22)

Mr Weir: Details of the additional funding allocated to schools in West Belfast to date to help support schools address many of the new pressures arising as a result of COVID-19, and to assist education settings to continue to provide a safe learning environment for our children and young people are detailed in the table below.

School Reference Number	School Name	PPE £	Restart £	Total £
101-0205	Forth River Primary	8,598	3,087	11,685
101-0221	Springfield Primary	7,416	2,663	10,079
101-0307	Springhill Primary	6,316	2,268	8,584
101-6059	Blackmountain Primary School	7,335	2,633	9,968
101-6498	Malvern Primary	3,993	1,434	5,427
101-6604	Harmony Primary	11,369	4,082	15,451
103-6388	St Mary's Primary	5,257	1,887	7,144
103-6565	St Kevin's Primary	24,776	8,895	33,671
103-6576	Holy Child Primary, Belfast	22,657	8,134	30,791
103-6589	St Teresa's Primary, Belfast	22,372	8,031	30,403
103-6602	St Oliver Plunkett Primary, Belfast	27,669	9,933	37,602
103-6620	St Peter's Primary, Belfast	13,855	4,974	18,829
103-6621	St Joseph's Primary (Slate Street)	12,266	4,403	16,669
103-6623	Holy Trinity Primary, Belfast	26,202	9,407	35,609
103-6624	St Paul's Primary, Belfast	15,566	5,588	21,154
103-6630	St Clare's Primary, Belfast	19,070	6,846	25,916
103-6688	St John The Baptist Primary	14,344	5,149	19,493
103-6697	John Paul II Primary	12,551	4,506	17,057
104-6501	Bunscoil Phobal Feirste	16,259	5,837	22,096
104-6571	Gaelscoil na BhFál	8,720	3,131	11,851
104-6593	Bunscoil an tSléibhe Dhuibh	8,802	3,160	11,962
104-6671	Gaelscoil na Móna	5,257	1,887	7,144
104-6672	Gaelscoil an Lonnain	2,282	819	3,101
111-0038	Shaftesbury Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
111-6155	Hope Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
113-6106	St Martin's Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
113-6228	St Bernadette's Nursery	2,119	761	2,880

School Reference Number	School Name	PPE £	Restart £	Total £
113-6314	St Teresa's Nursery	2,200	790	2,990
113-6315	St Michael's Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
113-6316	Holy Child Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
113-6340	St Peter's Nursery	2,160	775	2,935
113-6349	Matt Talbot Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
113-6353	St Maria Goretti Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
113-6383	St Oliver Plunkett Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
113-6603	The Cathedral Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
123-0053	St Louise's Comprehensive College	62,958	22,602	85,560
123-0155	St Genevieve's High School	42,461	15,244	57,705
123-0182	De La Salle College	36,023	12,932	48,955
123-0324	All Saints College	35,329	12,683	48,012
124-0291	Coláiste Feirste	29,381	10,548	39,929
142-0021	St Mary's Christian Brothers' Grammar, Belfast	47,187	16,941	64,128
142-0029	St Dominic's High School, Belfast	42,501	15,258	57,759
403-6285	Good Shepherd Primary, Belfast	13,528	4,857	18,385
403-6480	St Kieran's Primary	15,974	5,735	21,709
403-6591	Our Lady Queen of Peace Primary	15,485	5,559	21,044
403-6618	Christ the Redeemer Primary	28,973	10,401	39,374
403-6702	Holy Evangelists' Primary School and Nursery Unit	22,860	8,207	31,067
404-6600	Scoil na Fuisioige	6,112	2,194	8,306
413-6286	Good Shepherd Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
413-6368	St Luke's Nursery	2,037	731	2,768
413-6481	St Kieran's Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
413-6606	St Therese's Nursery	2,119	761	2,880
423-0223	St Colm's High School, Belfast	19,641	7,051	26,692
Total		755,289	271,155	1,026,444

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education (i) what actions have been taken against each of the recommendations contained in the Independent Review of Integrated Education; and (ii) what recommendations will not be actioned. (AQW 8325/17-22)

Mr Weir: Recommendations 12, 15, 17, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 and 28 of the Independent Review of Education have been actioned/ are in progress. The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) is a participant in the Area Planning Structures established by DE; updated guidance for schools seeking to Transform to integrated status was published in December 2017; the Education Authority (EA) has established the Shared Education and Sectoral Support Team; the length of time a Transformed school can access support funding has increased from three to five years; Fresh Start capital funding has been provided for integrated and shared education schools; when a Development Proposal to grow is approved, minor works provides for temporary accommodation whilst planning is ongoing; current practice is to design schools to allow for future growth where a site permits, however construction in advance of need risks a nugatory spend of public money so is not considered good practice.

Recommendations 2 and 22 are within the remit of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) to take forward as it is charged with the promotion of integrated education and my Department does not promote any sector above

another. Grant-maintained integrated schools are their own employing authorities and engagement has taken place with the EA about how they can access e.g. human resource advice.

It is my intention that a range of the recommendations should be considered within the wider review of education; I will be bringing forward proposals to the Executive on this in due course. These are recommendations 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 33, 37 and 38.

I have agreed that recommendations 5, 18, 21, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36 and 39 should not be taken forward at this time. Fresh start capital funding has specific and set parameters and NICIE has advised it does not consider the kitemark to be the most effective means of celebrating integrated success. The Education and Training Inspectorate self-evaluation framework and the policy position in Learning Leaders: Teacher Professional Learning are not intended to be sector specific.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Education why there is a delay in issuing first time concessionary passes this year.
(AQW 8495/17-22)

Mr Weir: There has not been a delay in the Education Authority's allocation of concessionary seats on home to school transport for the 2020/21 academic year. New requests for concessionary seats are not usually awarded before the mid-term break. This is to ensure that all applications for eligible pupils have been processed and the Education Authority can be confident that there is sufficient capacity on the relevant services and their allocation will not result in unreasonable public expenditure or disadvantage eligible pupils.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education (i) to detail the number of COVID-19-related absences of teachers and students, as of 9 October 2020; and (ii) for a breakdown in terms of absences due to positive COVID-19 cases and those who are self-isolating.

(AQW 8524/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department publishes information on school attendance on the departmental website on a weekly basis. This information provides the overall picture on school attendance but does not specify which absences are related to COVID-19.

Whilst we have been monitoring management information internally to get an indication of trend, we do not currently have definitive figures on absences that are specifically related to COVID-19. We are working to consider whether and how more specific information can be provided.

The overall pupil attendance rate has fluctuated from 95% attendance in the first week of the return of schools. The lowest was in week commencing 7 September when it fell to 91.6%. The latest figure for week commencing 5 October is 93.7%. As a result of the way that data is captured the pupil attendance rate will include pupils who are self-isolating and learning remotely. As set out in DE Circular 2020/08 a child will be marked as absent if they are ill (including with COVID-19) or do not engage with remote learning.

In relation to teachers, data from 6 October suggests that 92% of teaching staff were on site in schools.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans, in partnership with Education Authority and the Public Health Agency, to conduct a representative sample testing programme to confirm the science, which tells us that pupils play little part in the spread of COVID-19.

(AQW 8566/17-22)

Mr Weir: The issues we are now facing in education have never been encountered before, and indeed all areas of society face difficult challenges. As ever, the physical and mental health and well-being of the young people in our care and all our staff must be our priority.

The responsibility for COVID-19 testing rests with the Department of Health (DoH). DoH has advised that there are currently no immediate plans to introduce routine testing for asymptomatic teachers and pupils in Northern Ireland although DoH officials continue to actively consider a number of measures that would/will be used to help ensure everyone has confidence that schools are a safe place.

Currently testing is only available for individuals who have symptoms of COVID-19 or have been advised by the Public Health Agency Contact Tracing Service to have a test.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education how he proposes to use the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to evaluate the effectiveness of the Engage programme without inspecting; and what will the ETI be reporting on.

(AQW 8567/17-22)

Mr Weir: School inspections remain paused (subject to review) owing to COVID-19; however, when schools re-opened, District Inspector activity resumed across the schools sector. I have asked the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to report on the effectiveness and impact of the Engage Programme as a whole. ETI's report will be informed by collating samples of the schools' evidence to evaluate the programme as a whole, not by inspecting and reporting on, nor identifying individual schools. Therefore the ETI will not be carrying out a programme of school inspections and publishing individual school inspection reports.

Plans submitted online by schools will enable them to evaluate for themselves the effectiveness and benefit of the interventions which they choose. ETI District Inspectors will also draw on these school self-evaluations, together with a sample of discussions and meetings with participants to obtain a fuller picture of the benefits of the programme.

The ETI intend to report on the extent to which effective approaches have been identified and taken, and how lessons learnt may be shared going forward.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education, in light of the increased workload on principals due to managing the COVID-19 response in their schools, what additional support and resources he intends to put in place.

(AQW 8706/17-22)

Mr Weir: The issues we are now facing in education have never been encountered before, and indeed all areas of society face difficult challenges. As ever, the physical and mental health and well-being of the young people in our care and all our staff must be our priority.

I am on record praising the strenuous efforts of all school leaders and staff not only for their tireless work to support our vulnerable children, the children of key workers, and the thousands of pupils who have been educated through remote learning but also in terms of the significant amount of planning and preparation needed to get schools ready for the new term.

The Department is well aware it cannot deliver on its objectives without the support and confidence of the education workforce. The Department will continue to work alongside stakeholders through both Practitioners Groups and the established consultative fora to ensure a safe and effective school environment for the benefit of our children and young people.

In regards to support, on 24 August 2020 the Minister outlined a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools. The package includes: £17.5million towards the cost of substitute teachers and other school expenditure; £6.4M for PPE; £5M for school wellbeing initiatives; £3.1M for home to school transport and £1.4M to support special educational needs. The funding is for the first term of the new academic year.

In addition, the following support is also available to ALL schools:

- Public Health Agency helpline
- Education Authority dedicated telephone number for schools who require advice and support where a positive COVID-19 case is identified in a school
- A dedicated Education Authority email address has been established
- All schools have a named cross-organisational Link Officer.
- Information and flowcharts are also available on the DE website, EA website and C2k exchange.
- For statutory settings, the Education Authority Cleaning Service can be contacted.
- For other Education Restart queries, the Education Authority's Education Restart Helpline continues to be available.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether he will work with colleagues in the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency to (i) increase phone helpline capacity; and (ii) increase the hours that help is available in order to provide more flexible support to school principals.

(AQW 8707/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department continues to work with the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency (PHA) in order to provide guidance and support to educational settings. (i). The PHA are responsible for the provision of suitably skilled and experienced public health staff for their helpline. (ii). The PHA service for education has been operational from 24 August and moved to a 7 day a week service from early September.

Additionally the Education Authority provide a helpline for advice to schools, this is open 8am – 8pm weekdays and at weekends. These hours reduce to 8am – 4pm during school holiday periods.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education, in light of increasing COVID-19 related absences, what his Department is doing to increase the supply of appropriate substitute teachers in schools, in particular for Irish medium and Special Schools .

(AQW 8708/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register (NISTR) remains the mechanism by which all schools, including those in the Irish Medium and Special Schools sectors, should engage substitute teachers. There are approx. 9,300 teachers currently registered on NISTR, including over 500 newly qualified teachers who have been added to the register in the past few months to increase the available pool of substitute teachers.

Department of Finance

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 7017/17-22, (i) why only one grant could be paid in respect of each qualifying property if more than one business operated in that property; and (ii) how Land Property and Property Services determine which businesses in each qualifying property was paid the grant.

(AQW 7704/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):

- (i) This policy was set by the Department for the Economy (DfE).
- (ii) In line with the policy guidance from DfE, LPS paid the grant to the named ratepayer on the rate account where more than one business occupied the property.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance whether rates relief will be extended for the newspaper industry.

(AQW 7707/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am pleased that the local newspaper industry has benefitted from the four months rates holiday; additionally, a small number of its premises used for retail purposes have received the full 12 months relief. I recognise the high value to the community of local newspapers and I have engaged with its stakeholders. Covid-19 has led to a significant loss of income with the result that our local press is struggling to survive. Given this situation, I proposed to Executive colleagues that the 12 months rates support is extended to the local newspaper industry here, in line with the relief provided in Scotland. I am seeking that this matter is agreed by the Executive. I have received representations from the local newspapers sector and am seeking an increase in the Executive's advertising spending in this area.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the scale of the efficiencies that he is currently asking Translink to find prior to committing additional funding.[R]

(AQW 7758/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Responsibility for Translink lies with the Infrastructure Minister. Minister Mallon recently announced a planned cost reduction programme by Translink aimed at making savings of £10 million.

Of the allocations made to the Department for Infrastructure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, £70 million has been allocated to Translink to address lost income and other COVID pressures. This is in addition to the recurrent £20m which was allocated in the 2020-21 Budget to address Translink's underlying deficit.

Any consideration of further allocations would be a matter for the Executive.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance why he has announced approval of £80 million Financial Transaction Capital for Ulster University's Belfast campus, compared to the £126 million it had requested to bridge its funding gap.

(AQW 7863/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My department provided approval, subject to a number of conditions, for a £126m Financial Transactions Capital (FTC) loan funding to Ulster University over a two year period. These conditions aim to test and improve the capacity of UU to undertake large-scale capital projects. As such they should help UU deliver the expansion of the Magee campus.

The university anticipates a £105m spend to 31 March 2021, which will be met in part by the £80m FTC loan and a further £25m conventional capital grant previously agreed, as part of June Monitoring, due to the impact of Covid-19 on the University.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he has considered introducing gender budgeting to strengthen gender analysis across policy areas.

(AQW 7877/17-22)

Mr Murphy: You will be aware that Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 gives the Executive a statutory basis for our approach to equality. Gender is one of the nine grounds.

The system used for setting Budgets is known as an "equality informed resource allocation system", whereby decision-makers are informed of potential equality implications, including those related to gender, prior to final decisions being made on the Budget.

Section 75 also provides for gender considerations to be taken into account through consultation. I have written to the Women's Policy Group assuring them that as key stakeholders I will meet with them personally as part of the consultation process.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he has considered supporting gender-balanced COVID-19 taskforces and working groups with representation from women's sector groups to ensure a gender lens for the budget and other financial decisions.

(AQW 7878/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Please see the response provided for AQW 7877/17-22.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance whether he has received any bids from the Minister for the Economy for a package to support the local newspaper industry.

(AQW 7881/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My department has not received any bids from the Minister for the Economy to support the local newspaper industry.

However, I am pleased that the local newspaper industry has benefitted from the four months rates holiday; additionally, a small number of its premises used for retail purposes have received the full 12 months relief. I recognise the high value to the community of local newspapers and I have engaged with its stakeholders. Covid-19 has led to a significant loss of income with the result that our local press is struggling to survive. Given this situation, I proposed to Executive colleagues that the 12 months rates support is extended to the local newspaper industry here, in line with the relief provided in Scotland. I am seeking that this matter is agreed by the Executive. I have received representations from the local newspapers sector and am seeking an increase in the Executive's advertising spending in this area.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether consideration is being given to offering a new voluntary exit scheme within Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 7946/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are currently no plans to offer a new voluntary exit scheme within the NICS.

Given the current unprecedented situation, work to ensure existing resources are distributed to ensure delivery of agreed NICS priorities is continuing.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he has commissioned any research into the Barnett consequential of an increase in Corporation Tax in Britain to 24 per cent.

(AQW 7969/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Barnett consequentials are not linked to individual tax changes. Rather, under the Barnett Formula, the North is allocated a population-based proportion of changes in planned spending on comparable public services in England.

Therefore there would be no merit in my Department undertaking research in this regard.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the failure to appoint a Head of the Civil Service, whether the three rejected candidates are available for consideration as Interim Head of the Civil Service or in respect of a future permanent appointment.

(AQW 8004/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- Consideration has been given to filling the HOCS job on an interim basis. I understand a range of options are being considered with the aim of identifying a suitable individual.
- Arrangements for appointing a permanent HOCS have not yet been finalised.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance to detail the suicide rates for the last three years.

(AQW 8053/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) collates data on registrations of death.

There are some situations where the registration of the death can be delayed, specifically where the death has been accidental, unexpected or suspicious, and must be referred to the Coroner, only to be registered after completion of the investigation. The time taken to carry out this investigation can result in a delay in registration and thus such deaths may not appear in published statistics until at least six months after the death occurred. Suicides registered during the years in question will therefore not be reflective of suicides which actually occurred.

At present, NISRA recommends that users of suicide statistics refer to the subset of 'self-inflicted injury' only as the most accurate picture in relation to trends. This is due to an ongoing review of the coverage of the sub-category 'undetermined intent'. Further information on the review is available at <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/Guidance%20Note%20to%20Users%20on%20Suicide%20Statistics%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

The table below shows the number of registered deaths as a result of self-inflicted injury, 2017-2019. Since 2016, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has defined deaths from intentional self-harm in children aged 10 and older. Based on the ONS definition the table provides suicide rate per 100,000 population (10 years of age or more) for intentional self-harm.

Registration Year	Deaths from Suicide	Intentional Self Harm	Suicide rate per 100,000 of population (>=10 years of age) for Intentional Self harm
2017	305	173	10.7
2018	307	184	11.3
2019	197	187	11.4

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance what work has been undertaken by his Department with relation to the European Social Fund after March 2022.

(AQW 8103/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Funding from the European Social Fund will cease at the end of the current Programmes in December 2020 and the British Government will not participate in future EU Funding following its decision to leave the EU.

The funds currently delivered via the European Social Fund will be replaced by the British Government via new funding streams, most prominently in this case the Shared Prosperity Fund. However, it is not yet clear whether lost funding will be replaced in full and brought under the control of the devolved administration.

I have engaged with British Ministers in the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Treasury on the Shared Prosperity Fund regularly and intend to meet with the new British Minister with responsibility for this fund as soon as possible.

My officials have maintained ongoing dialogue with relevant Whitehall Departments seeking to put forward the specific and unique circumstances that prevail here, which must be taken into account as they develop and fund the overarching programme.

My department also leads on a cross-departmental "Future Policy and Finance Workstream" which ensures a cross departmental approach to future funding issues.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for the nature and value of the UK spending announcement that provided the £25.5 million in Barnett consequentials listed as operational costs of labour market delivery in the Summer Economic Update.

(AQW 8176/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The £25.5 million consequential resulted from an allocation of £895 million to DWP for the operational costs of labour market delivery. This included enhanced work search support and increasing the numbers of work coaches in Jobcentre Plus.

It is for the Executive to decide how to allocate Barnett consequentials based on local needs and priorities.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail additional financial support provided to Translink as a result of COVID-19 Barnett consequentials received.[R]

(AQW 8282/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I understand that the Infrastructure Minister has committed £70 million to Translink from the additional allocations she has received from the Executive in response to COVID-19.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance how much funding from Barnett consequentials has yet not been allocated to Departments.

(AQW 8297/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Following the Chancellor's announcement on 9 October the Executive's guaranteed Covid funding was uplifted from £2.2 billion to £2.4 billion.

As set out in my September 24 statement, some £1,670 million has been allocated to departments including £120 million of Executive funding. This left £55.2 million held centrally for further sectoral intervention/PPE and £600 million pending allocations based on the Health Minister's assessment of 2020-21 pressures for his department.

The Executive will consider how best to use the additional £200 million received on 9 October to provide further support required as a result of any increased local restrictions.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of full time equivalent staff in Civil Service departments who are (i) working from home; and (ii) back in the office.

(AQW 8354/17-22)

Mr Murphy: We do not hold the information requested centrally as it is a matter for each of the relevant departments.

However we do have information for the Department of Finance collated based on staff headcount.

On the 1st October 2020:

2492 staff were working from home

383 staff were working in the office

340 staff were on leave

6 staff were available for work but unable to work due to the nature of their job role, lack of IT equipment etc.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Finance what measures his Department is taking to ensure the sustainability of Belfast International Airport.

(AQW 8370/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In May I announced 100% rates relief for Belfast International (BIA), Belfast City & City of Derry airports until 31 March 2021, worth £2.2m in total, and £1.7m to BIA in particular. In June the Executive also agreed to further support to the airports given the material losses they are suffering. I have separately pressed the Treasury to ensure that they provide the maximum possible support to the industry locally. This includes calling for the abolition of Air Passenger Duty (APD).

My Department has been, and continues to engage with the airports, and the Economy and Infrastructure Departments locally, and the Department for Transport in London who are each responsible for various aspects of aviation. My Department is happy to consider any proposals for further support that may be brought forward for approval.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 7947/17-22, whether he will consider asking for permission from HM Treasury to use capital funding to cover the cost of voluntary redundancies.

(AQW 8534/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Funding decisions will be taken by the Executive as part of the Budget process and will be based on an assessment of prioritised need and available resources.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the resources in place for Land and Property Services to deliver the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 8719/17-22)

Mr Murphy: LPS has initially identified a small team of staff based mainly in the North West to resource the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme focused in that area. This team worked extensively on the Small Business Grant Scheme and is therefore experienced in the kind of work required to deliver the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

LPS and the wider Department of Finance will redeploy staff from other areas of work to scale up the number of staff working on the scheme to deal with any extension of scope, if required.

Department of Health

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health why the total bids for mental health in the recent June monitoring round totalled just over £2 million.

(AQW 5443/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In June monitoring round my Department was allocated £1.5m for the Mental Health Action Plan and £300k for mental health recovery and co-production. I also bid for £0.5m for Protect Life 2 of which I unfortunately only received £0.24m. Further to this I bid for £2m for Primary Care Multi-Disciplinary Teams, where practice based mental health practitioners are a key component, of which I received £0.54m.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on a return of face-to-face GP appointments.

(AQW 6390/17-22)

Mr Swann: I want to stress that GP practices are open and they are providing face-to-face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them and I have made sure that all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the pandemic does not negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how to best prioritise patients to provide this core service while maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are currently operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients 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. This approach ensures that patients are only

required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential and helps to ensure infection control and social distancing keeping both patients and staff safe.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face-to-face assessment to one of the primary care COVID-19 centres. That ensures that these patients do not attend the GP practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimum disruption.

The pandemic has meant change across a range of services, including in health and social care and General Practice has responded to this. Services will continue to adapt and develop to meet the ongoing threat from Covid-19 and the need to protect the public and staff from the virus.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30 July asking that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients who were accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available and how to access them with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open.

On 7 September GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that while patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and to issue prescriptions. Similar communication was also issued to MLAs.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health when he first became aware of the Refractory Epilepsy Specialist Clinical Advisory Service being set up.

(AQW 6655/17-22)

Mr Swann: RESCAS was launched at the end of January 2020 at the British Paediatric Neurology Association (BPNA) Annual Conference 2020 in Belfast. The conference was widely publicised within the Paediatric Neurology Association and was hosted by the Paediatric Neurology team in the Belfast HSC Trust and was attended by a large number of clinical specialists currently working within the HSC and from across the wider UK health service.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Health when GP surgeries will provide the full range of medical services and treatments that were available pre-COVID-19.

(AQW 6661/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pandemic has meant change across a range of services in health and social care and General Practice has responded to this. Services will continue to adapt and develop to meet the ongoing threat from Covid-19 and the need to protect the public and staff from the virus.

I want to stress that GP practices are open and they are providing face-to-face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them and I have made sure that all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the pandemic does not negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how to best prioritise patients to provide this core service while maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are currently operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients 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. This approach ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential and helps to ensure infection control and social distancing keeping both patients and staff safe.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face-to-face assessment to one of the primary care COVID-19 centres. That ensures that these patients do not attend the GP practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimum disruption.

Treatment room services are run either by the GP practice or the relevant Health and Social Care Trust. The level of service currently being provided in each treatment room is a local operational decision taking account of the need to ensure effective infection control measures, maintaining social distancing and available staffing levels.

Clinically urgent blood tests can be taken in general practice and the transport service to the laboratory and testing has resumed after a short pause at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic response.

Some less urgent "monitoring" blood tests may be deferred as part of the Practice/ Trust efforts to reduce numbers attending treatment rooms

Other clinically urgent treatment room services (e.g. some dressings) should also be available but many less urgent services (e.g. BP monitoring) may be deferred.

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Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of COVID-19 (i) tests; (ii) positive cases; (iii) hospitalisations; and (iv) deaths, in each of the last 8 weeks.
(AQW 6788/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of COVID-19 (i) tests, (ii) positive tests, (iii) hospitalisations, and (iv) deaths is updated on a daily basis on the DoH COVID Dashboard. Additionally, this information is provided in EXCEL format at the link below for each date from the start of the March 2020.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the number and dates of all COVID-19 outbreaks in each hospital.
(AQW 6809/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number and dates of all COVID-19 outbreaks in each hospital is not available and could only be collated at disproportionate cost.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what steps are being taken to avoid a collapse in the provision of the Dental Foundation Training Scheme, particularly in responding to the concerns raised by educational supervisors following the impact of COVID-19.
(AQW 6876/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware of the concerns of Dental Educational Supervisors regarding this year's Dental Foundation Training Scheme, particularly in regards to the additional time and resources required to fully support Foundation Dentists (FD) in light of the required enhanced Infection Prevention and Control measures and ongoing reduced activity levels as a result of Covid-19.

Officials met with representatives of the Dental Educational Supervisors and the British Dental Association on 22 September 2020 to hear their concerns and discuss funding arrangements for this year's scheme.

The equivalent level of funding as previous years has been committed to this year's scheme and the most fair and equitable way of distributing this funding within the current remuneration model is being developed. Full details will be provided to the profession at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) how much funding was made to GP surgeries, in each of the last 5 years; (ii) whether any additional funding was made to support GP surgeries during the COVID-19 pandemic; (iii) if so, what was it to be used for; (iv) whether his Department records the staffing levels in GP surgeries; (v) if so, whether any staff in GP surgeries were furloughed; (vi) whether correspondence was sent to GP surgeries to ask them to restart face-to-face appointments; and (vii) if so, when.
(AQW 7146/17-22)

Mr Swann: The annual Investment in General Practice reports produced by NHS Digital provide detailed information on general practice investment for each of the 4 UK nations. The most recent report was published in September 2019 and details the investment in General Practice from 2014/15 to 2018/19. The table below shows investment in General Practice in Northern Ireland 2014/15 to 2018/19 (excluding the costs of dispensing fees and reimbursement of the cost of dispensed drugs).

2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
£251.007m	£262.638m	£271.371m	£280.100m	£299.040m

Additional funding has been made available to support GP practices during COVID-19. To August 2020, £5.44million has been provided to practices to cover Easter Monday and Easter Tuesday working, sessional fees for Primary Care COVID-19 centres and postage costs.

In addition, funding of £1.7million is available to help support practices to install additional telephone lines into surgeries, purchase a new telephone system or new mobile phones. As part of this, practices will be required to ensure that dedicated lines are made available for community pharmacies, care homes and Trust laboratories.

Arrangements have also been put in place to allow for practices which are participating in the COVID-19 centre rota to claim and be reimbursed earlier for sick leave for GPs who participated in the COVID centre rotas.

Information on staff employed by GP practices is not held by my Department.

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.

GP practices receive core funding for the day to day running of their practice, including staff costs. Government guidance on the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme notes that if an employer has staff costs that are publicly funded (even if they are not in the public sector) they should use that money to continue paying their staff, and not furlough their staff.

GP practices are providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them and all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment to allow them to do so safely.

GP practices are currently 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.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30 July 2020 asking that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available and how to access them with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open.

On 7 September 2020, GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions. Similar communication was also issued to MLAs.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health (i) what the current testing capacity is for COVID-19 tests; (ii) for his assessment on whether the laboratories are able to handle this capacity; and (iii) whether there is set quota of tests that can be distributed daily.

(AQW 7163/17-22)

Mr Swann: Overall testing capacity is continually reviewed by my Department and there are active discussions underway to further enhance capacity across both aspects of our current testing programme.

Pillar 1 testing is delivered via Health and Social Care laboratories and laboratories operating as part of the Scientific Advisory Consortium. My Department is actively working with colleagues in the Public Health Agency and in the Health and Social Care Trusts to ensure that Pillar 1 testing capacity increases further.

Pillar 2 testing is delivered through participation in the National Testing Programme managed by the Department of Health and Social care in London (DHSC). Demand for testing has increased significantly across the UK in recent weeks and I am aware that the National Testing Programme is currently experiencing an exceptionally high demand. Plans are continuing at national level to bring on board additional laboratory capacity to support the Programme. Officials here continue to link with DHSC on a regular basis to ensure that testing capacity through Pillar 2 is enhanced for Northern Ireland

Optimising available testing capacity will continue to be a key priority for me and for my officials in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many outpatient appointments have been cancelled as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 7255/17-22)

Mr Swann: As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, 137,501 outpatient appointments have been cancelled. This includes new and review outpatient appointment cancellations.

These services have been restarted as part of Trust plans under the Strategic Rebuilding Framework which I published in June. This recognised the severe impact of appointment cancellations and challenged Trusts to reset these services as quickly and as safely as possible. Between 1 July and 31 August this year Trusts had committed to delivering 130,419 outpatient consultations, and delivered 152,941.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many operations have been cancelled as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 7256/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of operations cancelled due to COVID-19 is not available.

Information is available however on hospital appointments cancelled between 18th March and 17th September 2020. During this period some 11,741 elective appointments cancelled due to COVID-19 and related pressures. Of these, 10,648 were

elective day case appointments and 1,093 were elective inpatient appointments. These data include appointments for surgeries and other procedures such as diagnostic tests.

The Strategic Rebuilding Framework which I published in June recognised the severe impact of appointment cancellations and challenged Trusts to reset these services as quickly and as safely as possible.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the work his Department is undertaking on the provision of a COVID-19 vaccination programme.

(AQW 7279/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has established a joint flu/COVID-19 vaccination programme oversight Board which is chaired by the Chief Medical Officer. This Board will oversee the implementation of the expanded annual flu vaccination programme as well as the development of the COVID-19 vaccination programme to ensure any strategic interfaces between both programmes are identified and managed.

In addition to this, my Department has established a COVID19 vaccination programme Implementation Group, which includes key stakeholders from right across the Health and Social Care system. This group is developing plans and necessary preparations to ensure a Northern Ireland COVID-19 vaccination programme can begin once a vaccine becomes available.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether the Northern Health and Social Care Trust plans to improve the building facilities at Glengormley Community Services Centre.

(AQW 7288/17-22)

Mr Swann: Currently there are no plans to improve Glengormley Community Services Centre. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust does have a longer term plan for some of the staff from the community services centre to move to the proposed Newtownabbey Health and Care Centre when it opens, which would create more space in Glengormley Community Services Centre. However this is at an early stage, with the Strategic Outline Case for the Newtownabbey Health and Care Centre having been approved in August 2020 for the Trust to proceed to the drafting of an Outline Business Case.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how much funding has been provided to Transgender NI in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7298/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department does not provide funding to Transgender NI.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what measures were agreed to date with his counterparts in Dublin to support cross-border workers during the COVID-19 pandemic; and what data is being collected to monitor it's impact.

(AQW 7310/17-22)

Mr Swann: I met with the Minister for Health for the Republic of Ireland on 2 October at the 22nd North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Health and Food Safety meeting.

We discussed the importance of cross-border relationships in dealing with the pandemic, and the close and productive cooperation that has taken place between Chief Medical Officers and both health administrations to deliver an effective public health response.

We will continue to meet, both within the NSMC and outside the structures of the Council, to discuss the response to the pandemic, and will continue to exchange views to foster commonality in our approach, where possible.

I personally wish to express my appreciation for all those who have played a part in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular frontline health and social care workers, north and south.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many people in each Health and Social Care Trust have been diagnosed with dementia in each month of 2020.

(AQW 7349/17-22)

Mr Swann: This information is not available as requested. However, Dementia is one of the disease registers in the Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF), the purpose of which is to reward General Medical Services contractors for the provision of quality care. The register contains the number of people diagnosed with dementia.

QOF data is not available by month and is only available on an annual basis. As at 31 March 2020, there were 14,728 people on the dementia register.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health to detail the current daily COVID-19 testing capacity; and for his assessment of the adequacy of this capacity.

(AQW 7430/17-22)

Mr Swann: Overall testing capacity is continually reviewed by my Department and there are active discussions underway to further enhance capacity across both aspects of our current testing programme.

Pillar 1 testing is delivered via Health and Social Care laboratories and laboratories operating as part of the Scientific Advisory Consortium. My Department is actively working with colleagues in the Public Health Agency and in the Health and Social Care Trusts to ensure that Pillar 1 testing capacity increases further.

Pillar 2 testing is delivered through participation in the National Testing Programme managed by the Department of Health and Social care in London (DHSC). Demand for testing has increased significantly across the UK in recent weeks and I am aware that the National Testing Programme is currently experiencing an exceptionally high demand. Officials here continue to link with DHSC on a regular basis to ensure that testing capacity through Pillar 2 is enhanced for Northern Ireland

Optimising available testing capacity will continue to be a key priority for me and for my officials in the weeks and months ahead.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health how many people who have recovered from COVID-19 are suffering from long COVID and continue to report lasting effects of the infection.

(AQW 7495/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not currently possible to accurately report the number who have recovered from the disease.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health to detail the average time from first appointment to diagnosis for cancer patients.

(AQW 7591/17-22)

Mr Swann: In the most recently published month (August 2020), provisional figures indicate that the average waiting time from first appointment to diagnosis for patients with an urgent GP referral for suspect cancer was 26 days for patients who began treatment in August 2020. This information is not available for patients referred via other routes.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health to detail the average waiting time for surgery, broken down by type of procedure.

(AQW 7594/17-22)

Mr Swann: The tabulated information overleaf details the average waiting time in weeks for surgery for the years 2018/19 to 2019/20, the information has been broken down by speciality. (Table A).

Table A: Average waiting times in weeks for surgical procedures 2018/19 to 2019/20p

Speciality	2018/19	2019/20P
General Surgery	21.5	21.8
Urology	14.0	14.5
T&O	40.2	37.6
ENT	21.7	23.2
Ophthalmology	23.7	26.6
Oral Surgery	15.5	13.4
Restorative Dentistry	13.6	19.6
Paediatric Dentistry	27.6	22.0
Neurosurgery	10.2	13.1
Plastic Surgery	15.8	16.2
Cardiac Surgery	14.3	16.6
Paediatric Surgery	23.9	20.2
Pain Management	36.7	36.7
Total	22.3	21.5

Source: Hospital Inpatient System, Hospital Information Branch, Information & Analysis Directorate, Department of Health, NI.

P Data for time period 2019/20 is provisional and subject to change.

1 Figures do not include admissions to mental health or learning disability programmes of care which account for less than 1% of all hospital admissions.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to list by category the (i) planned; and (ii) emergency surgical procedures, which have been cancelled in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust due to COVID-19 since 1 March 2020.

(AQW 7604/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number and category of surgical procedures cancelled due to COVID-19 is not available.

Information is available however on hospital appointments cancelled between the 18th March and 24th September 2020 due to COVID-19 and related pressures. During this period some 1,729 elective inpatient, day case or regular attender appointments have been cancelled in the Southern HSC Trust. Emergency procedures are by their nature unplanned and, therefore, not possible to cancel.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, since the introduction of measures to tackle the spread of COVID-19, how many patients, deemed as an urgent case, had a procedure postponed due to not being classed as an emergency.

(AQW 7616/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of procedures postponed due to not being classed as an emergency is not available.

Information is available however on hospital appointments cancelled between the 18th March and 24th September 2020 due to COVID-19 and related pressures. During this period some 7,443 urgent elective inpatient, day case or regular attender appointments have been cancelled.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health (i) how many people are currently awaiting access to mental health services; and (ii) on average, how long a patient has to wait to access treatment, in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 7619/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Please find information detailed below.

Table 1. Number of active waits for adult mental health services, by HSC Trusts, as at 31 August 2020.

HSC Trust	Persons waiting
Belfast	519
Northern	594
South Eastern	430
Southern	1,201
Western	1,000

Source: Health and Social Care Board

- (ii) Information on the average waiting time is not available, however information is collected for active waits by waiting time band. Please find this information detailed below.

Table 2. Number of active waits for adult mental health services, by waiting time-bands, and by Trust as at 31 August 2020.

HSC Trust	0-3 weeks	3-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	Over 9 weeks
Belfast	271	188	45	15
Northern	413	147	33	1
South Eastern	267	159	2	2
Southern	370	290	215	326
Western	177	155	85	583

Source: Health and Social Care Board

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health what policy his Department will pursue in relation to the EU Directive on cross-border healthcare (Article 56), after the transition period on 31 December 2020.

(AQW 7620/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health Services (Cross-Border Health Care and Miscellaneous Amendments) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 were made to provide for an orderly close down of the scheme following EU Exit as maintaining effective access to cross-border healthcare abroad is inoperable without reciprocity with other Member States.

The Reciprocal and Cross-Border Healthcare (Amendment etc) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 laid in Westminster on 30 September 2020 ensures that, reimbursements for treatments started before the end of the transition period (IP completion day) will be facilitated where

- an application is received for authorisation before IP completion day
- an application is authorised before IP completion day, or

- treatment had already started before IP completion day

It is not clear at this stage whether the rights under the Directive will continue to apply to the UK as this will be subject to the ongoing negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union.

I have instructed my officials to work with the other Devolved Administrations in considering the concepts of the Directive in order that a fair and equitable solution is found.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health for an update on efforts to increase availability of free sexual health home testing kits. (AQW 7659/17-22)

Mr Swann: The HSCB and PHA continue to work with all Health and Social Care Trust genitourinary medical (GUM) teams to agree, disseminate and deliver a service model that is fit for delivery under pandemic circumstances. This will reduce face to face patient contact to the minimum essential for patient safety and therefore will rely heavily on sexually transmitted infections (STI) online testing for monitoring of patients taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

In total there were 1,973 orders for STI home testing kits issued in June; 2,600 in July and 1,886 in August. The statistics for September will not be issued for another 3 weeks.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of free sexual health home testing kits dispatched to Northern Ireland residents on a weekly basis for the last three months.

(AQW 7660/17-22)

Mr Swann: The HSCB and PHA continue to work with all Health and Social Care Trust genitourinary medical (GUM) teams to agree, disseminate and deliver a service model that is fit for delivery under pandemic circumstances. This will reduce face to face patient contact to the minimum essential for patient safety and therefore will rely heavily on sexually transmitted infections (STI) online testing for monitoring of patients taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

In total there were 1,973 orders for STI home testing kits issued in June; 2,600 in July and 1,886 in August. The statistics for September will not be issued for another 3 weeks.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health how many children are currently in the foster care system in the East Derry constituency.

(AQW 7669/17-22)

Mr Swann: The total number of children in care, and the number of children in care placed with foster carers in the East Londonderry Constituency at 1st October 2020 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of all Children in Care who are placed, and those placed with foster carers only, in the East Londonderry Constituency, at 1st October 2020.

	East Londonderry Constituency
Number of children in care	271
Number of children in care placed with foster carers	211

Source: Northern and Western HSC Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many incidents of suicide and attempted suicide have been reported in the North Down area over the last twelve months.

(AQW 7672/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of incidents of suicide in the North Down area over the last twelve months was requested from the Vital Statistics & Administrative Research and Support Branch (VARs) within the Department of Finance (DoF) who are the Official producers of deaths statistics. They have advised that the information is currently unavailable but will be made available after the publication of the Registrar General Annual Report scheduled for December 2020.

Information on the number of incidents of attempted suicide in the North Down area over the last twelve months is unavailable.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the age groups of people who have tested positive for COVID-19. (AQW 7676/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department publishes information on the age group of people (individuals) with a positive laboratory completed test for COVID-19 on a daily basis, on the DoH COVID-19 Dashboard at the link below:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to promote the benefits of vaccination against COVID-19. (AQW 7684/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are a number of vaccines in development around the world, while in the UK two of the leading contenders are going through the final phase 3 trial stage.

While I remain optimistic that a COVID-19 vaccine will become available, we will need to wait and see the final outcome of the trials. If a vaccine(s) becomes available, there will be a need to consider which groups will be offered vaccination and in which order. Prioritisation of the vaccine will be informed by advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

JCVI will advise on which vaccine(s) should be used, and on the groups best suited to receive the vaccine based on the best available clinical, modelling and epidemiological data. Promotion of the programme will be developed utilising this information.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the MS Society's recent report Too Much To Lose; and whether he plans to protect rehabilitation services in any restructuring of Health and Social Care. (AQW 7709/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware of the MS Society's "Too much To lose" report about the importance of improving access to community rehabilitation for people with MS and in principle I am supportive of its recommendations. Health and Social Care restart and rebuilding plans will take account of issues concerning patients' access to rehabilitation services including access for people with a diagnosis of MS.

In addition, work on developing clearer pathways and integration of services has been included as part of the considerations for my Department's wider Review of Neurology Services.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health what policy his Department will pursue regarding the use of European Health Insurance Cards after Northern Ireland leaves the EU. (AQW 7712/17-22)

Mr Swann: The use of European Health Insurance Cards (EHIC) is managed by the EU Regulations, EC 883/2004 on the coordination of social security (Regulation 883). The Social Security Coordination (Reciprocal Healthcare) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 were made to provide for an orderly close down of the scheme following EU Exit as maintaining effective access to EHIC is inoperable without reciprocity with other Member States.

The EU Withdrawal Agreement provides a continuation of EHIC scheme to those who are in scope of the Agreement and also ensures that anyone relying on an EHIC before the end of the transition period (IP completion day) will be able to continue to use that until their stay in another member state has completed.

Agreeing reciprocal healthcare arrangements is a reserved matter and therefore the responsibility of the UK Government. I would however support a continuation of an EHIC type scheme.

It is not clear at this stage whether an EHIC type arrangement will continue to apply to the UK as this will be subject to the ongoing negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health how many Health and Social Care staff vacancies there are within (i) Mid-Ulster Hospital; (ii) Antrim Area Hospital; (iii) Causeway Hospital; (iv) Holywell Hospital; and (v) Mid-Ulster domiciliary care services. (AQW 7749/17-22)

Mr Swann: (i), (ii), (iii) & (iv)

Information on the number of Health and Social Care staff vacancies actively being recruited to in the Mid-Ulster, Antrim Area, Causeway and Holywell hospitals at 2nd October 2020, is detailed in the table below.

Hospital	Vacancies actively being recruited to
Mid-Ulster Hospital	4
Antrim Area Hospital	98
Causeway Hospital	26
Holywell Hospital	16

Source: Northern HSC Trust

(v) At 2nd October 2020, there were 2 Home Care Worker posts actively being recruited for the Mid-Ulster area.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health (i) for his assessment of the adequacy of the protocols in place on a cross border basis to track and contact trace COVID-19 infections; (ii) whether medical professionals are aware of these protocols; and (iii) how these protocols are enforced. (AQW 7768/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is an established process in place for sharing the necessary details between Northern Ireland (NI) and Republic of Ireland (RoI) in respect of people who may have been in contact with someone who has tested positive on the other side of the border. The NI PHA Health Protection Team holds the contact details for the Health Protection Teams in RoI. Where the confirmed case provides details of one or more contacts who live in the RoI, the details of the contacts are sent to the appropriate local Health Protection Team in RoI. The information will be handed over via a telephone call from one registered Health Professional to another. In the event that a large number of contacts have been identified a document containing the information will be sent via an encrypted email.

Where the confirmed case resides in the Republic of Ireland with contacts identified as residing in Northern Ireland, the process works in reverse, with contact details provided to the PHA Contact Tracing Service to follow up in NI.

The Chief Medical Officers and their Teams in NI and RoI meet regularly (generally weekly) to discuss the pandemic and the actions in progress to mitigate and manage the risks associated with disease activity in their respective jurisdictions. The two CMOs have recently issued correspondence to their respective Public Health Services (on 30 September) to highlight the need for regular, formalised close cooperation and communication on COVID-19 mitigation between respective Public Health Teams in NI and RoI, under the existing Memorandum of Understanding.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health, in relation to public inquiry into events in Muckamore Abbey Hospital, (i) whether an (a) Inquiry Secretary; (b) Inquiry Solicitor; (c) Inquiry Chair and panel; and (d) Counsel has been appointed; (ii) to detail the appointment process for such appointments; (iii) whether the Terms of Reference have been settled in consultation with the families; (iv) what steps have been taken to ensure the independence of the inquiry; and (v) whether consideration has been given to a transfer of responsibility for the inquiry to another Executive Department to ensure independence and transparency. **(AQW 7794/17-22)**

Mr Swann: As I have already indicated, the programme of work to establish the Inquiry will take some time, and is not work that can be rushed.

Arrangements to establish the Inquiry are being progressed in line with the Cabinet Office best practice guidance for Government commissioned Inquiries.

My officials are currently preparing advice on potential candidates for the Chair of the Inquiry for my consideration, with appropriate input from professional, regulatory and other bodies in the Learning Disability field. The Chair must have the appropriate skills and expertise to discharge their duties effectively, and their impartiality must be beyond doubt.

I expect to be in a position to appoint the Chair later this autumn, and in line with the best practice guidance I will consult with them about the appointment of other panel members and the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry.

I also intend to engage with current and former patients of the hospital and their families to hear their views on the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

The independence of the Inquiry is a key requirement, and officials are considering appropriate governance structures to ensure that this is not compromised.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Health to detail his Department's budget pressures. **(AQW 7836/17-22)**

Mr Swann: My Department has submitted bids totalling £57.1 million relating to both Resource and Capital expenditure in the October monitoring round; details of which are set out below. In addition, pressures of £526.4 million have been identified and notified to the Department of Finance in relation to anticipated additional Covid-19 costs in 2020/21.

Resource Bids

- £15 million in respect of Health and Social Care Trusts deficits to enable statutory breakeven duty to be met in 2020/21;
- £1.5 million in respect of provision of palliative care services;
- £1.5 million to enable additional elective care activity in 2020/21.

Capital Bids

- £32.4m for Covid-19 and the rebuilding of services.
- £6.7m for urgent works, replacement of medical equipment and fleet across Health and Social Care.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to list COVID-19 services directly commissioned by (i) his Department; (ii) the Health and Social Care Board; (iii) the Public Health Agency; (iv) Public Health Agency; and (v) the Home Office and Border Force.

(AQW 7848/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department, and the relevant agencies, have commissioned a wide range of services as part of concerted efforts to manage the outbreak of Covid-19, and to mitigate its worst aspects. I have provided regular updates to the Assembly, and to the public, in relation to a number of these including for example

- Northern Ireland Contact Tracing Service;
- the StopCovid NI contact tracing app;

- Additional ICU capacity across Northern Ireland; and
- Nightingale Hospitals at BCH Tower Block and Whiteabbey Hospital.

Given the scale of the response to Covid-19 across HSC and by other statutory bodies, it would not be possible to provide a comprehensive list of every service commissioned by the organisations listed in your question.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether dementia-friendly barbers are allowed into care homes under the current COVID-19 regulations.

(AQW 7871/17-22)

Mr Swann: Visiting guidance for care homes not only recognises the rights of relatives to visit their loved ones but also takes into consideration the wellbeing of the resident.

I appreciate the physical and mental health benefits to a resident with dementia receiving a service such as that provided by a dementia-friendly barber. However the provision of this service must be balanced against the ongoing risk presented by COVID-19.

Decisions on allowing the service provided by a dementia-friendly barber will be made by the care home manager, based on an assessment of risk and taking into account the particular circumstances of individual homes, in order to ensure the safety of residents, visitors, staff and service providers.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether a person tested just prior to, or assessed following, their death as having been COVID-19 positive is recorded in COVID-19 related deaths statistics, regardless of the actual or primary cause of death.

(AQW 7913/17-22)

Mr Swann: The deaths reported daily on the DoH dashboard count the number of deaths reported by health trusts, where the deceased had a positive test for Covid-19 and died within 28 days, whether or not Covid-19 was reported as the cause of death.

A person testing positive just prior to their death will be included in this statistic.

A person assessed following their death as being COVID-19 positive will only be included if that assessment was due to a positive test. If based upon certification by a doctor without a positive test, the death will not be included.

In this latter instance with no positive test, this death should be captured in the NISRA weekly deaths statistics which are based on death registration information collected by the General Register Office (GRO). This statistic counts all deaths where COVID-19 was mentioned anywhere on the death certificate by the certifying doctor, whether or not COVID-19 was the primary underlying cause of death.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of children waiting for (i) an autism assessment; and (ii) an ADHD assessment.

(AQW 7926/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of children waiting for (i) an autism assessment, and (ii) an ADHD assessment in Northern Ireland are presented in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

Table 1: Number of children waiting for an autism assessment in Northern Ireland at 31 August 2020.

	Northern Ireland
Number of children waiting for an autism assessment	3,925

Source: Health and Social Care Board

Table 2: Number of children waiting for an ADHD assessment in Northern Ireland1.

	Northern Ireland
Number of children waiting for an ADHD assessment	2,604

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

1 The information has been extracted from individual HSC Trust systems on dates ranging from 31 August 2020 to 7 October 2020.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health what measures are being taken to ensure that the Track and Trace app is functioning correctly.

(AQW 7960/17-22)

Mr Swann: The StopCOVID NI Proximity App provides an anonymous exposure notification service, protecting people's identity, location. Before a new version of the app is released, it undergoes Quality Assurance testing to ensure that the app is functioning appropriately and reliably.

In addition to the testing a support line, and helpline email address, have been provided to respond to user queries, and pick up any issues as they emerge

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when he will release the Serious Adverse Incident level 3 review into Clifton Nursing Home.

(AQW 7965/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can confirm that the Level 3 Serious Adverse Incident panel has been convened and they are in the initial stages of the review into Clifton Nursing Home. The timeframe to complete this is by January 2021.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of times he has appeared before his Statutory Committee since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7973/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the restoration of devolution I have appeared before the Health Committee nine (9) times on:

- | | | |
|------------|------------|---------------|
| ■ 12 March | ■ 23 April | ■ 30 June |
| ■ 26 March | ■ 20 May | ■ 3 September |
| ■ 2 April | ■ 3 June | ■ 1 October |

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health for an update on his plans for the re-establishment of (i) the emergency department at Daisy Hill Hospital; (ii) emergency surgery at Daisy Hill Hospital; and (iii) elective surgery at Daisy Hill Hospital.

(AQW 7974/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that the Emergency Department on the Daisy Hill Hospital site will reopen on 19 October. Emergency Surgical services will also return on this date. A limited amount of elective surgery has continued at Daisy Hill Hospital over the last seven months for patients from across the Southern Trust through eight weekly bookable lists. These operating lists are utilised by surgical specialties, such as General Surgery, Breast, ENT, Urology & Gynaecology, to provide cancer services and clinically urgent surgery. These services continue to be delivered in line with the Trust's service rebuilding plans, subject to the prevailing Covid-19 conditions.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people (i) diagnosed with cancer; (ii) receiving treatment for cancer, in the five Health and Social Care Trusts for each quarter since September 2019.

(AQW 7998/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Full registration of all cancer patients diagnosed in Northern Ireland is currently only available from the NI Cancer Registry (NICR) up to the end of 2018.
- (ii) Information on the number of patients receiving treatment for cancer is not available centrally. Information is however available on the number of patients who had their first cancer treatment broken down by quarter and by HSC Trust and is set out in table 1.

Table 1: Number of patients who began treatment for cancer in NI by quarter and HSC Trust.

Quarter Ending	HSC Trust					NI
	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	
Sep-19	1,030	337	480	435	413	2,695
Dec-19	1,132	323	484	401	414	2,754
Mar-20	1,103	306	525	374	400	2,708
Jun-20	895	244	418	245	319	2,121

Source: Cancer Patient Pathway System

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health an update on the Regional Trauma Network.

(AQW 8019/17-22)

Mr Swann: Implementation of the Regional Trauma Network is jointly led by my Department and The Executive Office.

Progress on implementation of the Regional Trauma Network has been delayed due to the emergency Covid-19 response taking priority but efforts are being made to restart the process.

My officials are currently considering advice on legal aspects of the scheme and I am hopeful that progress will resume shortly.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on efforts for the Health and Social Care service to become a living wage employer.

(AQW 8020/17-22)

Mr Swann: As you are aware all employers in Northern Ireland are required to pay at least the UK Government national living wage of £8.72 per hour to employees over 25 and to pay the appropriate UK Government minimum wage rates to all other employees.

All HSC employees are paid within Agenda for Change pay rates and scales and are paid to all employees regardless of their age. The lowest annual salaries of HSC, Agenda for Change are those staff in Band 1 or at the bottom of Band 2, are £18,005, which equates to an hourly rate of £9.23. Those staff paid at Band 2 with more than 2 years of experience receive an equivalent hourly rate of £9.89 (£19,337 per/annum). These rates are above the UK government's current living wage of £8.72 per hour.

I have expressed my intention to seek to uplift the current minimum rates of pay for the lowest paid across the social care workforce, I have asked my officials to prepare options for my consideration. However I have been advised that all such options would likely create a significant recurrent financial impact and are currently unaffordable within Departmental budgets. I will therefore require Executive support to progress.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the treatment of dual diagnosis in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 8046/17-22)

Mr Swann: Patients with a dual diagnosis of mental health and addiction have access to the same mental health and addictions services as those with a single diagnosis. In both mental health and addiction services the level and kind of care and treatment are professional decisions based on the clinical needs of the patient.

It is accepted that sometimes people with dual diagnosis experience difficulties accessing services. To ensure that those with dual diagnosis get the best care and treatment available, both the upcoming substance misuse strategy and mental health strategy will consider the issue.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what treatment and resources are currently available across Northern Ireland for people with dual diagnosis.

(AQW 8047/17-22)

Mr Swann: Patients with a dual diagnosis of mental health and addiction have access to the same mental health and addictions services as those with a single diagnosis. In both mental health and addiction services the level and kind of care and treatment are professional decisions based on the clinical needs of the patient.

It is therefore not possible to list specific dual diagnosis services, as these are provided in line with all mental health and addiction services.

To ensure that those with dual diagnosis get the best care and treatment available, both the upcoming substance misuse strategy and mental health strategy will consider the issue of dual diagnosis.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health how many people are currently on the waiting list for treatment for dual diagnosis in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 8048/17-22)

Mr Swann: Dual diagnosis is the term used to describe where an individual has a co-occurring severe mental illness and a substance misuse problem. The Department does not hold this information centrally and was requested from Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts. The Northern, South Eastern and Southern HSC Trusts advised that waiting list information for dual diagnosis treatment is not available as this is not typically defined as a stand-alone service but is provided by practitioners within addiction service teams and mental health service teams. Belfast HSC Trust advised that they do not have a specific dual diagnosis service and therefore are unable to provide this data. Western HSC Trust advised that the exact information might only be obtained through a manual trawl requiring extensive and disproportionate labour at significant cost.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health whether he will be working directly with universities and other higher education institutions to ensure student mental health support services are well supported during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 8049/17-22)

Mr Swann: Support services for students are primarily a matter for the Department for the Economy however the health system is collaborating with higher education bodies to improve mental health outcomes for students.

The Public Health Agency provides support through its role in the Student Wellbeing Network Forum and by funding the production, print and distribution of *Minding Your Head: Student Guide to Mental Health* booklets. These have been updated and circulated electronically this year due to COVID. In addition £13,800 was allocated by the PHA in 2019/20 towards mental health resources and services for students.

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is also part resourcing a pilot with Queens University Belfast and the University Of Ulster for students with a term time Belfast post code to provide a dedicated and responsive student mental health service, with the aim of better engagement and better clinical outcomes through early intervention.

Finally it is important to note that mental health services are available to anyone that requires support and this has continued throughout the pandemic.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many inpatients have contracted COVID-19 whilst in hospital, broken down by hospital.

(AQW 8054/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of patients who have contracted COVID-19 whilst in hospital is not available.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health why some Health Service dentists are not carrying out routine fillings.

(AQW 8055/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to the Covid-19 pandemic additional Infection Prevention and Control procedures, including fallow time following Aerosol Generating Procedures and enhanced cleaning, limit the number of patients which practices can treat each day. Activity levels are therefore considerably lower that they were prior to the pandemic.

Guidance issued to all Northern Ireland General Dental Practitioners recommends that patients are ordered on the basis of need and that patients requiring emergency and urgent care are given the highest priority, therefore patients requiring routine care may be required to wait longer than previously expected to be treated.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when the review of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority resignations will be published.

(AQW 8063/17-22)

Mr Swann: Once the review has been completed and report submitted I will, in due course, consider the findings and the recommendations and on the manner of publication.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health for an update on plans for a Nightingale facility at Whiteabbey Hospital to provide additional Health Service capacity for COVID-19 care.

(AQW 8072/17-22)

Mr Swann: The experience of the first surge in COVID-19 identified a role for additional step down capacity to support flow through hospital and ease pressure on the system; therefore, I have commissioned work to develop an additional Nightingale facility on the Whiteabbey Hospital site.

This regional, intermediate care facility at Whiteabbey hospital will provide 100 additional beds for patients who have recovered beyond the acute phase of infection, but who still require intense rehabilitation. Work is continuing at pace to deliver this additional facility and remains on track to be operational by December 2020.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether his Department will review pregnancy appointment accompaniment and maternity ward visitation restrictions on partners.

(AQW 8082/17-22)

Mr Swann: Following the Executive's decision to invoke limited additional restrictions across Northern Ireland in response to increasing COVID-19 transmissions, updated visiting guidance for all healthcare settings, including maternity services has been published and is available here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>. This took effect from 23 September 2020.

The guidance is based on the best scientific advice available, with restrictions applying in line with the current Regional Alert Level Position – we are currently at Level 4, defined as “a high or rising level of transmission - enforced social distancing”. This means that for expectant mothers:

“Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour (to be determined by midwife) and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week.”

Normal maternity care provision has had to be adapted in order to reduce the spread of infection and to protect expectant mothers, their families and staff providing care and therefore the wider population. This is not the experience we would hope for expectant mothers, but managing this crisis has meant that many difficult requests have been and will continue to be made of the public around all aspects of health service provision.

While the situation is kept under constant review, there are no current plans in place to initiate changes to the structure of the existing visiting restrictions, which remain aligned to the pandemic alert levels/R value - the risk of the virus spreading.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health why early abortion services have been removed from the Northern Health and Social Care Trust; and when they will resume.

(AQW 8127/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am advised by the Northern Trust that they do not have the resource to continue the abortion provision they had established. In the absence of a commissioned service agreed by the Executive, any resumption is a matter for the Northern Trust to determine.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what assurances he can give that services are not being removed from Daisy Hill Hospital.

(AQW 8132/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that the Emergency Department on the Daisy Hill Hospital site will reopen on 19 October 2020. Emergency Surgical services will also return on this date. Other services continue to be delivered in line with the Trust's service rebuilding plans, subject to the prevailing COVID-19 conditions.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the current number of ventilators available in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 8137/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current number of ventilators available in each HSC Trust is provided in Table 1 overleaf.

Table 1: Number of Ventilators by HSC Trust

TRUST	Current Invasive Ventilators	Current Advanced Transport Ventilators	Additional Invasive Ventilators for Delivery October 2020
BHSCT	149	12	24
NHSCT	41	4	15
SEHSCT	24	6	17
SHSCT	30	4	0
WHSCT	24	7	24
PAEDIATRIC ICU	18	3	1
Total	286	36	81

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment on whether there is adequate provision of ventilators within the health system.

(AQW 8138/17-22)

Mr Swann: Northern Ireland has a regional inventory of 268 invasive ventilation devices, with delivery of a further 80 ventilators expected by the end of October. This inventory exceeds the currently anticipated demand as set out in Trusts' local surge plans and in the latest Critical Care Network Critical Care Plan.

Whilst equipment is unlikely to be a limiting factor in the provision of critical care to patients in Northern Ireland, there is considerable stress on limited staff resources and, therefore, no room for complacency in our efforts to control the virus.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health, under the new restrictions in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, (i) whether personal trainer one to one sessions are permissible; and (ii) whether residents are allowed to travel outside the area for sport.

(AQW 8139/17-22)

Mr Swann: Under the new restrictions in Derry City and Strabane District Council area you may still attend an indoor gym for the purposes of individual training. However, personal trainer one to one sessions are not permitted.

Residents in a designated district are permitted to travel outside the area to participate in a sporting activity. However, they should have regard to any restrictions imposed in the area they are travelling to. I would also advise individuals to consider whether their journey is absolutely necessary.

More information is available at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-and-localised-restrictions>

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health for an update on the return of Daisy Hill Emergency Department and the resumption of all services, including acute surgeries.

(AQW 8179/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that the Emergency Department on the Daisy Hill Hospital site will reopen on 19 October 2020. Emergency Surgical services will also return on this date. A limited amount of elective surgery has continued at Daisy Hill Hospital over the last seven months for patients from across the Southern Trust through eight weekly bookable lists. These operating lists are utilised by surgical specialties, such as General Surgery, Breast, ENT, Urology & Gynaecology, to provide cancer services and clinically urgent surgery. These services continue to be delivered in line with the Trust's service rebuilding plans, subject to the prevailing COVID-19 conditions.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the appointment process to (i) the Mental Health Strategic Reform Board; and (ii) the Strategic Advisory Panel; and to list the membership of these groups.

(AQW 8183/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have provided the membership of the Mental Health Strategic Reform Board in my response to AQW 7402/17-22. Members sit on the Board by invitation.

The Strategic Advisory Panel will provide expert advice on policy direction and includes a wide range of stakeholders. The Panel does not have formal membership, but includes those who need to be included to ensure informed advice for the development of the mental health strategy. This includes:

- Oscar Donnelly, Retired Director of Mental Health and Disability Services, Co Chair
- Phil Hughes, Retired Director of Community Care, Co Chair
- HSC Trust Mental Health Service User Consultants
- Carer and service user representation
- The Mental Health Champion
- Representatives from the Community and Voluntary sector
- Representatives from Local Universities
- Persons with specialist knowledge
- Persons from other jurisdictions with relevant skill and knowledge
- Representatives from professional organisations
- Representative from the Public Health Agency
- Representative from the Health and Social Care Board
- Department of Health officials

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for an update on the progress and status of the business case for specialist community perinatal mental health services.

(AQW 8184/17-22)

Mr Swann: My officials are currently considering the detail of a business case for enhanced community perinatal mental health services and I understand that further discussion with the PHA is ongoing regarding points of detail and clarification. I am hopeful that this work will progress quickly.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to list the membership of the Protect Life 2 implementation group; and who is responsible for the work of suicide prevention within each Executive Department.

(AQW 8185/17-22)

Mr Swann: The membership of the Protect Life 2 Implementation Group is comprised of representatives from the following groups and organisations:

- | | |
|--|--|
| ■ Northern Protect Life Implementation Group, | Branch |
| ■ Southern Protect Life Implementation Group | ■ Department for Infrastructure |
| ■ South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust Community of Interest Group | ■ Department of Justice |
| ■ Western Protect Life Implementation Group | ■ The Executive Office |
| ■ Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs | ■ Lifeline Service/BHSCT |
| ■ Department for Communities | ■ Northern Health and Social Care Trust |
| ■ Department of Education | ■ Southern Health and Social Care Trust |
| ■ Department for the Economy | ■ South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust |
| ■ Department of Finance | ■ Western Health and Social Care Trust |
| ■ Department of Health/ Health Improvement Policy | ■ Bamford Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing |
| | ■ Coroners Service NI |
| | ■ Education Authority/Support Services for Pupil |

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wellbeing ■ Education Authority Youth Service ■ Family Voices Forum ■ Health and Social Care Board ■ Mental Health Champion ■ Nursing Midwifery and Allied Health Professionals ■ Police Service of Northern Ireland ■ Public Health Agency/Health Improvement ■ Regional Trauma Network/ HSCB | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Royal College of General Practitioners Northern Ireland ■ Royal College of Psychiatrists NI ■ Rural Support ■ SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) ■ Samaritans ■ Self Harm Steering Group ■ Towards Zero Suicide Programme ■ Victims and Survivors Service |
|--|--|

A representative from other Departments is included on the PL2 Steering Group. It is recognised that responsibility for suicide prevention often covers several policy areas in each Department. Advice on individual responsibilities can be obtained by contacting each Department directly.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how each Health and Social Care Trust is progressing plans for 24/7 mental health liaison services in their acute hospitals.

(AQW 8187/17-22)

Mr Swann: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have 24/7 mental health liaison services in place across all Trust sites.

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust have 24 hour mental health liaison at their Antrim Area Hospital site. Liaison services are available 7.30am-10pm at the Causeway hospital site with out of hours cover provided by Crisis Resolution Home Treatment Team (CRHTT).

The Southern Health and Social Care Trust is considering extending mental health liaison services to acute hospital wards and Integrated Liaison to 12 hours a day from 9am to 9pm.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has plans in place to introduce a comprehensive 24/7 service and is awaiting the outcome of a bid for funding to implement it.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust is awaiting the outcome of a bid for funding for additional staff to embed 24/7 mental health liaison.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what plans are in place to improve the exterior of Newtownards Minor Injuries Unit.

(AQW 8191/17-22)

Mr Swann: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (SEHSCT) plans to eventually move the Minor Injuries Unit (MIU) from its current location to another facility on the Ards Hospital site and demolish the building that the MIU is currently based in. These plans – and the related timetable - are subject to funding and the impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 response. In the short term SEHSCT will continue to maintain the building and keep it safe.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health how he intends to provide better access to the flu vaccination; and whether he would consider drive-through locations and council facilities to administer the vaccination.

(AQW 8205/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has provided better access to flu vaccination this year by increasing the amount of vaccine procured so that increased uptake by those who are eligible for the free of charge vaccine can be facilitated. In addition, eligibility for the vaccine has been extended to pupils in year 8 and to household contacts of those who shielded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Arrangements have also been made to improve access to the vaccine for health and social care workers by launching the community pharmacy flu vaccination programme for these workers, increasing the pool of peer vaccinators, and allocating additional funding to Trust occupational health services in order to deliver more vaccination clinics in a wider range of locations.

Additional funding has also been made available to the GP led element of the vaccination programme so that it can be delivered slightly differently this year due to the Covid-19 related requirements of social distancing and enhanced infection control. The modified arrangements have included the use of community halls and the establishment of drive through arrangements for mass flu vaccination clinics.

Where it is necessary to have vaccination clinics in non-clinical community settings, GP practices make this decision taking into consideration social distancing and infection control requirements.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Health when his Department was notified of a second death in ten days in custody at HMP Maghaberry.

(AQW 8209/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department was notified by the South Eastern Trust on 28 September 2020.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health whether individual and group counselling sessions can continue under the new restrictions introduced in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area.

(AQW 8226/17-22)

Mr Swann: Individual and group counselling session may continue under the restrictions introduced in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. When delivering face to face counselling services, each provider needs to make their own risk assessment based on their premises, the nature of their business and their clientele. Consideration should also be given to moving from face to face meetings, to using technology, such as phone calls and video conferencing.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether his Department can commission a psychological autopsy.

(AQW 8264/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are no current plans to commission a psychological autopsy process in Northern Ireland.

A comprehensive Serious Adverse Incident procedure is already in place and work is ongoing to improve these procedures. A report was published by GAIN/RQIA in September 2019 detailing learning from Serious Adverse Incidents arising from Suicide, Homicide and Self-Harm. Learning from the SAI process is also being undertaken through the Towards Zero Suicide collaborative in Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail the current visiting regulations for relatives visiting family members at nursing and residential homes.

(AQW 8298/17-22)

Mr Swann: Following the Executive's decision to invoke limited additional restrictions across Northern Ireland in response to increasing COVID-19 transmissions, updated visiting guidance for all healthcare settings, including nursing and residential homes has been published (available here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>).

The guidance, which took effect from 23 September 2020, is based on the best scientific advice available, with restrictions applying in line with the current Regional Alert Level Position – we are currently at Level 4, defined as “a high or rising level of transmission - enforced social distancing”. This means that, for Care Home settings:

“Indoor visiting in residents’ rooms – one person for one hour once weekly will be permitted where this can be accommodated within social distancing. This does not apply to care partner* arrangements.

Alternatives in line with Care Homes’ visiting policies, e.g. outdoor visiting, virtual visits, designated visiting rooms etc. should be provided.”

*Care partners are more than visitors. Care partners will have previously played a role in supporting and attending to their relative’s physical and mental health, and/or provided specific support and assistance to ensure that communication or other health and social care needs are met due to a pre-existing condition. Without this input a resident is likely to experience significant and/or continued distress. While care homes are presently considering how they can facilitate the care partner concept going forward, with continued focus on mitigating the transmission of Covid-19, I do recognise the challenge this will present.

Where there are exceptional circumstances, the full visiting guidance should be referred to, but it is important to note that for the safety of visitors, residents and staff, the Care Home Manager is still responsible for making decisions regarding permitting visitors into the home on a day to day basis. This decision will be based on a risk assessment of the environment and rely on the ability to ensure social distancing and safety of residents, staff and the visitor.

I recognise that these restrictions cannot facilitate the level of visiting contact that we would hope to be able to allow in normal circumstances. The approach to managing this crisis has meant that many difficult requests have been made of the public around health service provision, especially regarding presence within nursing and residential care homes during these unprecedented times.

While the situation is kept under constant review, there are no current plans in place to initiate changes to the structure of these existing visiting restrictions, which remain aligned to the pandemic alert levels/R value - the risk of the virus spreading.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what steps are being taking to provide support and services to vulnerable people following the announcement that Livability can no longer deliver services to the Southern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 8324/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has contacted all families affected by the closure of the Livability day care service in Newry and has given them assurances that all service users who previously availed of the daycare service will have an urgent re-assessment of their needs undertaken to determine how their day activity needs can be most appropriately met going forward.

The Trust have been offering alternative supports to service users and their carers / families to help meet their day time requirements through the use of Self Directed Support including Direct Payments. In some cases, the Trust have been able to meet service users needs.

The Southern Trust are committed to identifying, securing and progressing alternative day services to the service users impacted by this closure and will ensure communication with families remains a high priority.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQO 705/17-22, whether her Department has legislative competence to bring forward a scheme to bridge the Bannfoot.

(AQW 7697/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): My Department does have the legislative power and competence to take forward or approve a scheme to bridge the Bannfoot. However, as advised in my answer to AQO 705/17-22, the proposal for a walking and cycling bridge at Bannfoot did not feature in the greenway network set out in 'Exercise – Explore – Enjoy: a Strategic Plan for Greenways'.

A proposal to build a bridge at this location would be for the local Council to consider in the first instance in consultation with the local communities and stakeholders. I am committed to working with communities and councils to improve local infrastructure and active travel.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the Glider fare-paying passenger numbers; and (ii) the projected passenger numbers since the March COVID-19 lockdown, broken down by month.

(AQW 7737/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Fare paying Glider journey data available for the current financial year (excluding feeder services) is laid out in the table below. Figures for Periods 1 and 2 are the same because the 2020-21 Business Plan was revised in the early part of the financial year due to the impact of COVID-19 and was not completed until after period 2.

Please note that every third period is 5 weeks rather than 4 which contributes to increases in these periods. Periods largely represent months - P1 represents mainly April and so on.

Period	(ii) Estimated	(i) Actual
1	37,235	37,235
2	45,235	45,235
3	70,511	124,644
4	59,023	156,414
5	78,737	209,127
6	182,722	
7	173,318	
8	195,151	
9	294,011	
10	241,685	
11	259,900	
12	351,421	

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure to provide a list of areas in Foyle that are facing significant development or building impacts due to limited wastewater infrastructure capacity.

(AQW 7764/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water have advised me that the constituency of Foyle comprises of 28 wards and 12 settlements. NI Water has assessed this constituency in terms of waste water infrastructure capacity issues.

Culmore Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW) serves the following settlements: Ardmore, City of Derry, Culmore, Drumahoe, Lettershendoney, Newbuildings, Maydown, and Strathfoyle. The Culmore WwTW has available treatment capacity. However, wastewater network capacity issues are emerging and are being identified via sewer network modelling activities being undertaken in Derry City. This has resulted in some negative planning responses being provided in parts of the sewer catchment namely Skeoge and Strathfoyle.

Donnybrewer WwTW serves the following settlements: Campsey and Eglinton. Sewer network modelling activities are identifying capacity issues and as a result some negative planning responses are being provided in parts of the sewer catchment such as Eglinton

I understand that in addition to the above there are significant constraints to development to areas such as Skeoge Lands & Crescent Link due to a deficit sewerage (and water) infrastructure.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the significant cross border links between Derry and Donegal and the need to reduce our reliance on cars and other heavily polluting means of transport, whether she has undertaken any discussions with the Irish Government to take forward a renewed feasibility study on a railway link between Derry and Letterkenny.

(AQW 7765/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recently met with Minister Ryan at the NSMC and agreed to extend the high speed rail feasibility study to Derry supporting sustainable transport in the NW. I am committed to exploring options to develop our island infrastructure with my counterpart.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a timeframe for the publishing of the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan.

(AQW 7766/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks, by road, rail and bus, and reflect my commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across Northern Ireland.

My Department is currently progressing the RSTNTP to draft report stage in order to allow it to be presented for public consultation. Timescales for the Transport Plan have been affected by the COVID-19 emergency which has impacted upon staff resources and work priorities.

I am intending to publish the draft RSTNTP for public consultation in late 2021, with a view to issuing the finalised Plan in spring 2022.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to bring consistency to the issue of whether Battery Energy Storage Solutions in Northern Ireland are to be deemed generating stations in the Planning (Development Management) Regulations (NI) 2015 in the context of requiring (i) follow-on generating licences from the Utility Regulator; and (ii) generating consents from the Department for the Economy; together with the statutory consultees (a) System Operator for Northern Ireland in their Grid Code defining the battery storage operator as a 'energy storage generator'; and (b) Northern Ireland Electricity Networks defining a 'generating unit' to include 'energy storage devices'.

(AQW 7826/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of an issue with the treatment of battery energy storage systems in the planning system in Northern Ireland. Following a review of this type of development I will consider what advice may need to be provided to planning authorities in Northern Ireland.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to her answer on the North South Interconnector on 15 September 2020 when she told the Assembly that we faced a deficiency in energy supply by 2025, (i) where did she get this information from; and (ii) for her assessment on whether this is in contradiction to the latest capacity statement for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7830/17-22)

Ms Mallon: References to the deficit in energy supply by 2025 were obtained through the evidence submitted during the processing of the planning application and this is available to view on the NI Planning Portal (planning references O/2009/0792/F & O/2013/0214/F)

The recent All-Island Generation Capacity Statement 2020-2029 indicates that for Northern Ireland the recent Single Electricity Market's (SEM) Capacity Auction process saw enough capacity secured to ensure near-term security of supply. As that document indicates, that adequacy shifts year-on-year. The document also reaffirms the importance of the Interconnector to electricity supply.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 6502/17-22, given the large volume of traffic calming requests, why there has not been more spending on traffic calming measures in the East Belfast constituency.

(AQW 7833/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can advise the member that there are many competing priorities across my Department and the Local Transport and Safety Measures programme, which includes Traffic Calming, must compete for the limited funding available to cover all my Department's capital projects and programmes. I will continue to highlight the need for enhanced capital funding with my Executive colleagues and through the Comprehensive Spending Review, will continue to bid for an appropriate level of baseline funding for Local Transport and Safety Measures. In the meantime my officials will continue to evaluate any new traffic calming requests and review previously assessed locations, to ensure that the current available budget is used to address those areas where the need is greatest.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following her announcement of the additional £14.8 million secured by her Department to progress work on the A6, to detail (i) how; and (ii) where this public money will be spent.

(AQW 7854/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Although site works were scaled down on these two A6 Flagship projects as result of COVID19 restrictions, the situation improved greatly from May onwards with works now ongoing on most activities. The additional funding will support the delivery of these schemes. The A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe scheme requires an additional £12.8 million to deal with increased costs due to COVID-19, increased productivity and in-year expenditure reprofiling. The A6 Randalstown to Castledawson scheme requires an additional £2 million to deal with increased costs due to COVID-19 and in-year expenditure re-profiling.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether any evaluation has been undertaken concerning the effectiveness of installations that have been made under the Flood Protection Grant Scheme.

(AQW 7859/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme aims to encourage the owners of homes, located in areas of flood risk, to make modifications to their properties in order for them to be more resistant to flooding. A key element of the scheme is a 'wet test' of the flood resistance measures that are installed to demonstrate that they are effective.

In addition an evaluation of the Scheme, undertaken earlier this year, included a survey of applicants that had works completed. The responses to the survey indicated that the vast majority of responders did not identify any issue with the effectiveness of the measures installed. My Department's officials will, where possible, continue to engage with homeowners and investigate any issues of non-performance with the measures installed under the scheme as I am keen to ensure any lessons that can be learned are understood to further improve performance in this area of work.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) revenue; and (ii) capital financial support provided to Translink during (a) 2020/21 financial year to date; (ii) 2019/21 financial year; and (iii) 2018/19 financial year.[R]

(AQW 7860/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has allocated £132m to Translink to date in the 2020/21 financial year. This includes £50m of COVID-19 recovery funding and I will be allocating a further £20m based on the additional COVID-19 recovery funding announced for Translink in August. Capital funding allocated for the same period is £154.6m.

For 2018/19, my Department allocated £83.1m of revenue funding and £101m of capital funding. The revenue allocation for 2019/20 was £71.4m and a £100m capital allocation.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Infrastructure when taxi driver practical tests will resume.

(AQW 7882/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) is working on proposals to resume taxi driving tests as soon as possible with the priority of keeping staff and customers safe in line with public health advice and guidance.

However, due to the nature of these tests and the minimum time required for the on road driving element being 60 minutes, they must be fully risk assessed to ensure they can be delivered safely.

Whenever the DVA is in a position to announce the resumption of taxi driver practical tests they will make that information available on NIDirect and through social media channels.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) what communication there has been with the Ballyhalbert community regarding their request for a footpath between St Andrews development and High Street via Shore Road; and (ii) what alternatives have been considered to a footpath along this section of the Shore Road.

(AQW 7887/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has received a number of requests for the provision of a footpath between St Andrews development and High Street, via Shore Road and has responded to those requests.

A feasibility study was carried out to identify options for the potential provision of a footway link at this location and this established that the costs would be significant due to the need to make significant alterations to the existing coastal defences, carry out extensive road widening and acquire land to the frontage of properties. My Department is currently unable to progress a scheme at this location this year however I have asked officials to review and update the feasibility study and costings to see if a scheme might be able to be included in future programmes.

In the meantime improved traffic management measures have been provided at this location to enhance road safety. Measures include edge of carriageway and 'SLOW' road markings as well as advanced warning signage on each approach to alert drivers that there may be pedestrians on the road ahead.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) what progress has been made to repair the areas highlighted in the Ards Peninsula Seawalls Condition and Repair Cost Report, HSU/657/02, published March 2018; and (ii) whether she

will include in her bid for capital monies for 2021/22 additional investment to address the outstanding areas of seawalls and roads impacted by coastal erosion that have not yet been replaced.

(AQW 7888/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since the publication of the Ards Peninsula Seawalls Condition and Repair Cost Report, my Department has invested £320,000 during the 2018/19 and 2019/20 financial years to provide repairs at:

- fifteen separate locations along the Portaferry Road;
- Shore Road, Kircubbin;
- Shore Road, Ballyhalbert; and
- Springvale Road, Ballyhalbert.

During the current financial year, work has commenced to provide repairs at:

- two locations on the Quintin Bay Road;
- one location on the Kearney Road; and
- three locations on the Loughshore Road, Portaferry.

Work is also scheduled to commence shortly at Shore Road, Kircubbin. The estimated costs of these schemes is around £180k.

I will be engaging with my Executive colleagues on the forthcoming Budget process; when I have certainty on the funding available to me, I will consider future programmes to properly maintain the road network and this will include investment to address the outstanding areas of seawalls and roads impacted by coastal erosion that have not yet been replaced.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many potholes have been reported for repair in Upper Bann; (ii) how many are left to be repaired; and (iii) the average time taken for repair, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7891/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that you have been contacted by officials and have clarified that you are requesting information on the number of potholes reported by the public as opposed to the number of potholes recorded by the DfI Roads inspectors.

I can advise that my Department does not maintain records by constituency area, but rather, does so on a District Council basis.

The following table provides the number of potholes that had been reported (by the public) in each of the last five years in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area.

Year	Number of potholes reported by the public.
2015	380
2016	1038
2017	711
2018	3054
2019	1132
2020	1291 (to date)

All reported defects would have been actioned either for repair or for further inspection at a later date. However it should be noted that some defects can remain unrepaired as they do not meet the criteria for repair as laid out in the Roads Service Policy & Procedure Guide: RSPPG_E019 Road Maintenance Standards for Safety. This can be found at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/drd/road-maintenance-standards-for-safety-rsppg-e019.pdf>

The Department does not hold information on the average time taken for repairs, however some defects need to be treated more urgently than others and for that reason there are five target response times, the details of which can also be found in RSPPG_E019 Road Maintenance Standards for Safety.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has plans for a road widening scheme on Craigarogan Road, Mallusk.

(AQW 7912/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Craigarogan Road, Mallusk is a rural road serving a small number of residential dwellings, is lightly trafficked and there are currently no plans to widen it.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council's recent decision to invalidate application LA10/2020/0206/F 50MW BESS, whether she plans to bring consistency to the processing of

Battery Energy Storage Solutions applications in Northern Ireland and issue advice to local councils that they should all be categorised as major developments if over 50MW.

(AQW 7919/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of an issue with the treatment of battery energy storage systems in the planning system in Northern Ireland. Following a review of this type of development I will consider what advice may need to be provided to planning authorities in Northern Ireland.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 6787/17-22, whether she will give consideration to the provision of a walking link between Millreagh Drive and the A20 Upper Newtownards Road, to allow local residents easier access to public transport.

(AQW 7927/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very keen for my Department to progress schemes that would improve facilities for pedestrians and I have asked my officials to carry out an assessment for the provision of a footway link between Millreagh Drive and the Upper Newtownards Road.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps her Department has taken since August 2017 to mitigate the threat of further flooding along the River Faughan, Londonderry.

(AQW 7930/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since the August 2017 flooding in the North West my Department has carried out a feasibility study for Drumahoe, which is located adjacent to the River Faughan. A viable flood alleviation scheme was identified, however it is worth noting that the viability is marginal. The scheme has recently progressed to the detailed design stage and subject to the flood alleviation scheme remaining viable, and the availability of funding to my Department in future years, The next steps, following confirmation of affordability, would involve the procurement of a contractor.

My Department has also been working with our multi agency partners, community leaders and residents to establish community resilience groups in Drumahoe and Eglinton. This will enable these communities to be better prepared to respond to the risk of flooding. This work has included providing community sandbag containers and access to river level alert information.

Routine watercourse maintenance is also being carried out by my Department on the River Faughan annually to ensure it is in a free flowing condition. Repair works to the flood banks along the River Faughan, just downstream of Drumahoe, have also recently been completed.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to address the remediation requirements at Creggan Reservoir.

(AQW 7931/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not own or manage the Creggan Upper and Creggan Lower reservoirs and therefore cannot directly allocate resources towards the remediation of these structures. Nevertheless, my officials are working closely with Derry City and Strabane District Council who own the reservoirs, and the organisation who lease the site, to explore how they could address the safety issues that have been identified by the reservoir engineers they have commissioned.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will review the traffic light sequencing at the The Esplanade, A2, Shore Road junction in Holywood.

(AQW 7943/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As you will appreciate this is a very heavily trafficked part of the road network and my Department has made a number of modifications to signal phasing and timings at this junction over the last 2 years to seek to improve traffic progression without compromising the safety of road users. The current arrangement is considered to be the optimum solution which provides the best balance between traffic progression and safety needs.

As with many of the main junctions on arterial routes leading into Belfast, traffic movements are monitored on CCTV by staff at our Traffic Information and Control Centre (TICC) and during peak periods when traffic flows are substantial, traffic signal timings are adjusted to assist traffic progression.

I have asked officials to continue to monitor this busy junction and to implement any further changes considered appropriate to improve the efficiency of the operation of this junction.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure what progress her Department has made for commuting and leisure cycle routes in West Belfast.

(AQW 7951/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department carried out a feasibility study to identify possible walking and cycling routes through and to the Colin area in 2018. Since that time officials have been working with Belfast City Council, Department for Communities and NI

Housing Executive to consider a number of routes that could be built and this work is ongoing. You will be aware that progress on these projects is reported through the Colin Town Centre Stakeholders Group.

Building on the Colin report, a further report was commissioned by my Department on the feasibility of active travel routes through north and west Belfast with a view to feeding into a final Belfast Bicycle Network document, which I plan to publish later this year.

Last year my Department completed a linkage at the Broadway Roundabout which ultimately connects the Falls Road through Bog Meadows to Belfast city centre. My Department is also assisting in delivering crossing points for the Belfast City Council's Peace IV project, which aims to connect shared civic space in the west of the city and, in September, I announced part funding for an element of this greenway scheme.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme. (AQW 7958/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme aims to encourage the owners of homes, located in areas of flood risk, to make modifications to their properties in order for them to be more resistant to flooding. I am pleased to confirm that an evaluation of the Scheme has demonstrated both a need for, and benefit from, a property level protection grant scheme.

I consider a grant scheme, which helps to deliver individual property level protection, to be an important part of my Department's approach to effectively manage flood risk. I have therefore asked officials for further information on the way forward to ensure this assistance can continue to be offered. The existing scheme remains open to new applications while this work is undertaken.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to provide a breakdown of the additional funding for winter pressures, as per each Department division area. (AQW 7963/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The average normal budget requirement for provision of Winter Service is £7m but has in the past been as much as £10m for a severe winter as was the case in 2017-18.

I welcome the recent £5m allocation for winter service from the Covid bids exercise which will make a much needed contribution and my Department has prudently bid for the remaining £2m as part of October Monitoring.

Based on gritted road lengths across Divisions, I plan to allocate the funding as follows:

Division	Allocation
Eastern	£670k
Northern	£1,240k
Southern	£1,309k
Western	£1,421k
HQ	£360k
Total	£5,000K

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many PSNI officers will be assigned directly to the Safe Transport Team; and how they will be allocated locations. (AQW 7964/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are six police officers and an Inspector associated with the safe transport pilot project. They will work closely with the Translink team to identify the locations where crime and anti-social behaviour are most prevalent and they will then work in those areas initially. This will be reviewed on a regular basis and adjusted as necessary.

They will also play a deterrent role by travelling on public transport on a regular basis across the network.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of pieces of official Ministerial correspondence she has issued since the restoration of devolution. (AQW 7986/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have defined 'official Ministerial correspondence' as cases logged as CORRs by my Private Office. Since the start of my mandate, up until 4pm on 15 October 2020, I have issued 1207 pieces of official correspondence.

All other correspondence received by and issued by my Private Office, for example invitations to me as Infrastructure for Minister, press matters and correspondence with the Committee for Infrastructure, have not been included.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of appearances she has made since the restoration of devolution (i) before the Assembly; and; (ii) before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.

(AQW 7987/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since taking up post in January 2020, I have appeared before the Assembly on thirteen occasions and once before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of times she has appeared before her Statutory Committee since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7988/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have appeared before the Committee for Infrastructure on six occasions since taking up post in January.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of written assembly questions her Department has answered since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7989/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As of Friday 16 October 2020 I have answered 1576 written assembly questions since taking up post in January 2020.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure what statutory powers her Department can utilise if a private reservoir or dam owner refuses to carry out required safety maintenance.

(AQW 7999/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Statutory responsibility for the Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 is currently with DAERA and a Transfer of Functions Order is being progressed through the Executive Office to transfer responsibility for the provisions under the Act from DAERA to my Department.

It is important to note that the absence of the regulatory reservoir safety framework provided for by the Act does not remove the common law duty on reservoir managers to ensure reservoir safety and the Department has written to reservoir managers to remind them of their responsibilities on a number of occasions and to advise them to progress any safety related works.

My Department has sought legal advice and has identified that there are a number of reservoirs where the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 could be used, in some circumstances, to temporarily lower and control the water level in a reservoir in order to reduce flood risk. However, the use of these powers would have limited impact and would not address the underlying issues of reservoir safety and condition. They cannot therefore be regarded as a substitute for full commencement of The Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, which is the most appropriate legislation to regulate reservoir safety.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action her Department is taking to make the transport system more affordable and accessible for people living in poverty.

(AQW 8016/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of the Public Service Agreement that my Department has with Translink, a broad range of urban and rural services are provided across our community. In recognition of those living in poverty, the service provision includes a number of socially necessary routes to ensure accessibility to public transport for all our citizens. This service provision is reviewed at least annually by my Department.

In terms of affordability, my Department administers the Concessionary Fare scheme which provides free and reduced cost fares for many in our society. My Department is also responsible for general decisions to increase or decrease fares and does so in consultation with the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.

Translink also offers discounts for jobseekers, young people and free travel for people fleeing domestic abuse. In addition, my Department provides revenue grant funding to a number of community transport organisations, through the provisions of the Rural Transport Fund (RTF) and the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities (TPPD), to deliver specialised, accessible and affordable transport.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 6785/17-22, to detail the stops along the route.

(AQW 8018/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Please find below the stops along the route for the Sunday service.

- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| ■ Comber, Cemetery | ■ Comber, Orange Hall |
| ■ Comber, 2-8 de Wind Drive | ■ Comber, 97-105 Mill Street |
| ■ Comber, Health Centre | ■ Comber, Belfast Road |
| ■ Comber, Killinchy Street | ■ Comber, White Houses Stop |
| ■ Comber, Church High Street | ■ Comber, Garryowen |
| ■ Comber, Andrews School | ■ Comber, Coach Road |
| ■ Comber, Railway Street | ■ Comber, Ballystockart |

- | | |
|--|---|
| ■ Comber, Comber Road | ■ Shandon, Barnett's Road |
| ■ Dundonald, Cottage Garden Nursery | ■ Shandon, Towell House |
| ■ Dundonald, Peartree Hill | ■ Shandon, Knockdene |
| ■ Dundonald, Millars Forge | ■ Belmont, Knock Road (Upper Newtownards Road) |
| ■ Dundonald, Grahamsbridge Road | ■ Ballyhackamore, Greenwood Park |
| ■ Dundonald, Limetree Res. | ■ Ballyhackamore, Astoria Gardens |
| ■ Dundonald, The Moat | ■ Ballyhackamore, Ballyhackamore |
| ■ Dundonald, East Link Road | ■ Strandtown, North Road (Upper Newtownards Road) |
| ■ Dundonald, East Link | ■ Bloomfield, Beersbridge Road |
| ■ Dundonald, Hanwood Heights | ■ Orangefield, Holywood Arches |
| ■ Dundonald, Dundonald Ice Bowl | ■ Orangefield, Connswater |
| ■ Stormont, Tullycarnet Primary School | ■ Ballymacarrett, Avoniel |
| ■ Gilnahirk, Govan Drive | ■ Ballymacarrett, Templemore Avenue |
| ■ Tullycarnet, Melfort Drive | ■ Willowfield, Short Strand (Albertbridge Road) |
| ■ Gilnahirk, Kilmory Gardens | ■ Belfast, Lanyon Place Station [Glider] |
| ■ Tullycarnet, Kings Square | ■ Belfast, Europa Buscentre |

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for Infrastructure what financial support has been received by Northern Ireland airports as a result of government grant schemes, broken down by airport.

(AQW 8026/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The NI Executive, DfT and HM Treasury agreed a package of temporary financial support to address the COVID 19 emergency situation and ensure continuation of minimum air connectivity between Northern Ireland and GB. A maximum package of assistance of £5.7m was announced on 1 May, with the Executive meeting half of the costs.

A total amount of £3.1m from DfT and the NI Executive was distributed between Belfast City Airport (BCA) and City of Derry Airport (CoDA) over a 3 month period. This enabled BCA to continue to maintain services for passengers on the Belfast - London Heathrow route operated by Aer Lingus. It also enabled CoDA to continue to maintain services for passengers on the Derry City - London Stansted route operated by Loganair. I am unable to provide a breakdown of the funding by airport as it may impact on the commercial interests of the airports.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure to provide details of the most recent traffic assessment for Crieve Road, Newry.

(AQW 8033/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that my officials updated the initial assessment of Crieve Road, Newry in August this year and a footway scheme at this location remains under consideration for possible inclusion in a future works programme.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in the context of money recently returned to the Executive Office, whether she will progress urgently traffic flow works on the Ebrington site.

(AQW 8043/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the importance of the redevelopment of the Ebrington site and the need to ensure that its impact on the public road network is appropriately addressed and managed.

The internal roads within the Ebrington site do not form part of the public network and responsibility for traffic management within the site rests with the Executive Office/occupiers.

Agreement in principle for the Department to deliver mitigation works at nearby junctions to address the impact of the development on the local road network was given on the basis that funding would be made available from the Executive Office within a timeframe that the Department could deliver with due regard to our pressures and resource constraints. This funding and the expenditure profile over multiple financial years has yet to be agreed.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she will announce £1.7 million of funding upgrade of vital sewerage infrastructure which will help unlock the H2 lands, Derry, to enable the development of 500 new social homes.

(AQW 8044/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The upgrade of this important sewerage infrastructure is to be linked to the DfI Roads A2 Buncrana Road Upgrade, in order to optimise delivery by minimising cost and traffic disruption.

The DfI Roads Scheme delivery is scheduled for 2022/2023 to 2025/2026. This is dependent on the successful completion of statutory procedures, positive economic appraisal and availability of funding.

The delivery of all water and sewerage services is subject to the Executive providing funding for NI Water, which is sufficient to implement such essential infrastructure, and enable the delivery of much needed social housing. The £1.7 million funding

referred to, will specifically cover the Buncrana Road to Skeoge water trunk main. However this area also requires additional upgrades to pumping stations at Skeoge Lands and Lenamore Road, at a combined cost of £8.7 million, and are also aligned with the DfI Roads Scheme.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans to extend the railway line to Belfast international Airport.

(AQW 8051/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently developing the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which is one of four draft Transport Plans intended to set out the framework for transport policy and investment decisions until 2035. It is concerned with strategic roads, the buses which run on them and the rail network across the North. Whilst the RSTNTP will primarily consider capital investment for the road and rail networks, it will also consider resource costs for improved bus and rail services in Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans to create a railway halt for George Best Belfast City Airport.

(AQW 8052/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is imperative, given the unprecedented impact of covid, that our public transport network is protected. I am committed to its protection and to seeing our public transport network expanded.

My Department is currently developing a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP), one of four draft Transport Plans intended to set out the framework for transport policy and investment decisions until 2035. It will include a specific focus on improving the sustainability of transport networks and reducing carbon emissions and will therefore include a focus on our strategic roads, the buses which run on them and the rail network.

The publication of the RSTNTP for consultation has been delayed by the impact of Covid 19 but we are making as much progress as is possible in the current circumstances and I am keen that the consultation process provides an opportunity for views to be sought on ideas to improve connectivity and encourage greater use of public transport, both bus and rail.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure what grants are available for home owners within flood risk zones who are wishing to increase the flood resilience of their property.

(AQW 8067/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme remains open to new applications. The aim of the scheme is to encourage the owners of residential properties that have previously flooded internally, are located within known flood prone areas and cannot benefit from a flood alleviation scheme in the medium term (within five years), to modify their properties to make them more resistant to flooding.

The main elements of the grant scheme, include a water entry survey and bespoke design, installation of flood resistance measures and a 'wet test' to demonstrate that the measures fitted are effective. The grant scheme covers 90% of the costs, up to a maximum of £10,000, of the total survey and estimated installation costs. The homeowner is required to make a contribution of 10% of the survey and estimated installation costs and any additional cost that may be incurred above £10,000. Further information on the Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme is available on my Department's website via the following link:- <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/homeowner-flood-protection-grant-scheme-application-pack>.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure on what date the 20mph pilot scheme is due to commence for (i) Moneynick Primary School; (ii) Duneane Primary School; (iii) Mallusk Primary School; and (iv) Ballyclare High School.

(AQW 8080/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All 100 schools included in the part-time 20 mph programme for the current financial year have been informed and the process to develop the enabling legislation has commenced. You will be aware that the statutory process includes a public consultation, during which we may receive representation, and it is not therefore possible at this time to be definitive about the commencement dates for individual schools within the programme though officials are working to deliver these schemes as quickly as possible.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the criteria used to determine the 100 schools for the recently announced 20mph speed limit scheme.

(AQW 8093/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

All schools were assessed across our four Roads Divisions, and 25 schools in each Division were identified based on considerations of need, established using factors such as traffic speeds, traffic volumes, and number of collisions, as well as individual site constraints.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when work will be carried out to fix flooding issues on Windmill Road, Millisle. (AQW 8111/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to be able to confirm that my Department carried out works to upgrade the drainage on Windmill Road, Millisle in September 2020 that should address the flooding issues at this location.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on driving instructors' access to facilities at MOT centres. (AQW 8117/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to advise that following a further review of their risk assessments, the DVA can now accommodate driving instructors within the reception areas of test centres to wait for their pupils to complete their driving tests. On 14 September, officials advised the Northern Ireland Approved Instructors Council (NIAIC) and emailed all approved instructors of these new arrangements being put in place by test centre managers.

The DVA has asked NIAIC and approved instructors to work with local management to ensure compliance with social distancing, hand sanitising, the wearing of face coverings and other requirements at the test centres to ensure the safety of staff and customers.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given its heritage value and the defects that the bridge is currently suffering from, what measures she is considering to protect the King's Bridge in Stranmillis. (AQW 8159/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A study of King's Bridge is ongoing to identify the most appropriate means of preserving the future integrity of this structure. It is estimated this work will be completed within the next 1218 months. In the meantime my officials will continue to inspect the structure and carry out any repairs that are deemed necessary.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps her Department are taking to encourage the roll out of hydrogen-fuelled buses across Northern Ireland. (AQW 8166/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Infrastructure Minister, I am determined to secure a public transport service that connects people; unlocks our economic potential; protects our valuable environment; encourages active lifestyles; and improves well-being. I also want to see a low emission – and in time zero emission - public transport service.

Progress is already being made and Translink has developed a fleet strategy designed to address the issues that should see the transition to Zero Emission Buses in Belfast and Derry by 2030 and net zero carbon bus and rail transport by 2040. I recently also announced a £30m investment in both Zero Emission Hydrogen and Battery Electric buses that will enter service in 2021/22. I also recognise that, in order to facilitate the transition to zero emission public transport, the accompanying energy infrastructure needs to be developed. My Department and Translink are currently working with the Department for the Economy to develop the transport element of a new Energy Strategy, including the supply of renewable fuels such as sustainably produced electricity and "Green" Hydrogen."

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will urgently address the difficulties people are facing when trying to book a driving test online. (AQW 8193/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In anticipation of high demand for bookings when driving tests were fully reinstated on 5 October and to avoid the system crashing as had been experienced elsewhere, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) introduced a queueing system to their online booking system to ensure that demand could be managed in a controlled manner and the system would be able to cope with the number of customers attempting to book at any given time.

The queueing system clearly indicates that the customer is in a queue, confirming their queue position and the anticipated waiting time to manage customer expectations and ensure that the system does not crash. In order to further assist customers, it also includes an alert system which will notify them when their allocated time for booking has arrived. This software worked and the system has not crashed, despite the high demand.

Due to the unprecedented demand some customers experienced long waiting times and while thousands of bookings have been made up to the end of January 2021, there remains a high demand for driving tests, just as there is across these islands. Additional test slots for November, December and January will be released nearer the time when staffing availability is confirmed as the DVA continues to recruit more examiners to increase its testing capacity.

Customers are also being advised to continue to check the online booking system as some appointments may become available on a daily basis, due to test cancellations or the availability of additional staff resources.

In addition dynamic messaging has been added to both the queueing system and NIDirect to inform customers of the current position regarding driving test availability at test centres. I appreciate that learners are keen to pass their driving tests, but unfortunately the COVID 19 restrictions mean that waiting times will be longer than usual. The safety of customers and staff remains my top priority at this challenging time.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures are being introduced to deal with outstanding driving test bookings.

(AQW 8199/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests has reopened and thousands of bookings have been made up to the end of January 2021. At this time, the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021 and will confirm plans to release slots for February onwards in due course. This will be communicated to customers on nidirect and through social media channels.

The DVA has released all its driving tests slots for October and these have been fully booked. However, where additional slots become available, through test cancellations or the availability of additional staff resources, further slots will be released to help meet immediate demand. Additional test slots for November, December and January will also be released nearer the time when staffing availability is confirmed as the DVA continues to recruit more examiners to increase its testing capacity.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and is working hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice to ensure that necessary and proportionate control measures relating to Covid-19 are incorporated into its risk assessments for driver testing to be conducted safely.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the backlog in driving tests, whether she would consider putting a derogation in place to allow qualified driving instructors to test and confirm that their candidates are proficient.

(AQW 8208/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The minimum requirements for the conduct of driving tests and the requirements for driving examiners are prescribed in Directive 2006/126/EC, the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) 1981 Order and the Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996.

The Directive states that a driving examiner may not be active as a commercial driving instructor in a driving school simultaneously. In addition, the Directive establishes the minimum entry requirements for new driving examiners and mandates an initial training and qualification for new examiners.

Adherence to the requirements of the Directive in relation to driving tests and driving examiners enables the mutual recognition of driving licences across our island and across GB. Seeking a derogation from the requirements could well affect the mutual recognition of those driving licences. Lastly, while it might be possible in principle to seek a derogation to these requirements in the Directive, this would have to be sought on a UK wide basis. In informal engagement with DVSA and DfT, indications are that it is unlikely they would support such a move, and in addition, the Commission is also unlikely to consider such a request for a derogation.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she intends to make a statement on the generational status of Battery Energy Storage Systems.

(AQW 8236/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of an issue with the treatment of battery energy storage systems in the planning system in Northern Ireland. Following a review of this type of development I will consider what advice may need to be provided to planning authorities in Northern Ireland.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 7141/17-22, whether her Department will be including creating a cul-de-sac in Orpen Park as one of the options in the upcoming consultation on traffic calming measures for the area.

(AQW 8252/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Further to my response under AQW 7141/17-22, I can advise the Member that, following a residents meeting on 2 October 2020, my officials have agreed to carry out a feasibility study into making Orpen Park a cul-de-sac and creating a turning head.

Progression of such a scheme will be dependent upon a favourable outcome to the feasibility study, its relative priority ranking within current work programmes, successful completion of statutory processes and the availability of funding.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures her Department is taking to ensure the sustainability of Belfast International Airport.

(AQW 8272/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I fully recognise Belfast International Airport's (BIA) role, not only as central in building our economy and as a key gateway for Northern Ireland but also as a main employer in the local area.

I am committed to working alongside my Executive colleagues, the Finance and Economy Ministers, on maintaining connectivity across these islands and further afield.

I am due to meet with the airport alongside Executive colleagues given our shared responsibilities.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many personal injury claims have been made against her Department in the Lagan Valley constituency, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 8306/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not maintain records of claims by Assembly constituency areas but instead records claims by Roads Section Office areas, which broadly align with Council areas.

The table below provides details of the number of personal injury claims received by my Department for the Lisburn and Castlereagh Section Office area in each of the last three financial years:

	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Number of personal injury claims received	39	41	44

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the concessionary fare scheme for black taxis for North Belfast and West Belfast.

(AQW 8329/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At this point the financial pressures facing my Department mean it is not possible for me to extend the Executive's Concessionary Fares Scheme in any way. However, I have requested a meeting with Minister Murphy on the issue of the ongoing underfunding of the existing scheme and hope to be in a position to provide a further update to members in the coming months.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure when testing for Approved Driving Instructors will resume.

(AQW 8330/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of the phased resumption of practical driving tests, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has reinstated some driver testing services, where testing can be done safely in line with Public Health Agency advice and guidance on social distancing requirements. This includes motorcycle driver testing from 6 July and tests for drivers of buses, tractors and module 4 CPC tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers from 20 July. Practical car and lorry driving tests resumed from 1 September 2020, initially prioritising those requests from key workers followed by those customers whose tests were cancelled due to lockdown. The DVA has now reopened bookings for these driving tests for all new customers.

The DVA is working hard to reinstate other practical driving tests as soon as possible, including the qualifying test for Approved Driving Instructors. However, due to the longer duration of this test, it must be fully risk assessed to ensure it can be delivered safely in line with PHA advice and guidance. Whenever the DVA is in a position to resume this service I will ensure this is clearly communicated to all affected customers.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the residents' parking scheme at the Iveagh Streets on the Falls Road.

(AQW 8415/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that my officials had been engaging with elected representatives and other key stakeholders to take forward a scheme proposal covering the part of the Iveagh area for which the necessary support had been provided during the informal consultation. The intention had been to progress the proposal to formal consultation stage.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 has had an impact on the progression of many schemes including the Iveagh Resident's Parking scheme, however officials have now restarted preparation work for the formal consultation for this scheme with the aim of having it completed later this year.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will (i) suspend closure of Baranailt Road South as part of A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe Dualling Project; and (ii) explore alternatives in light of limited consultation undertaken and the impact that closure will have upon local communities.[R]

(AQW 8610/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The closure of the lower Baranailt Road is essential to enable the construction of the new Claudy grade separated junction as part of the ongoing A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe Dualling scheme. For safety reasons it is not possible

to maintain vehicle or pedestrian access through the construction site when the road is closed and alternative construction methods have already been considered and ruled out.

Officials from my Department, along with staff from the Contractor, have been actively engaged with the community. Following notification of the closure a number of concerns were raised and in response an online 'Zoom' meeting was arranged with the community group Claudy Life, local residents, and a number of elected representatives. A number of concerns were discussed and staff from my Department are working to try to address them with mitigating measures. The Department will continue to work with the local community to minimise the impact of these works while also ensuring that works are completed in the quickest timeframe possible.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that a funding package has now been granted, (i) what actions she has carried out; and (ii) how she will rectify the issues in Galliagh Shore, Enniskillen.
(AQW 8661/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water is not sufficiently funded to meet the regulatory outputs required of it by the Utility Regulator, even with the benefit of the additional funding allocated to my Department. The Minister of Finance allocated £15m to NI Water for named projects, to help accelerate this specific list of water and sewerage infrastructure projects that have been delayed due to the COVID-19 mandatory lockdown. These are projects which the Utility Regulator requires NI Water to take forward as part of its previously agreed commitments under the Price Control process.

In terms of the situation in Galliagh Shore, I must clarify that this development remains in private ownership and, therefore, neither my Department nor NI Water has any legal remit to resolve the issue. However, I am keen to work with Executive colleagues to assist the residents of Galliagh Shore, and the many other developments that are in a similar position with unadopted and inadequate sewerage infrastructure.

With this in mind, I am seeking further discussions with the Minister of Finance regarding NI Water's future funding, to enable the company to fulfil its statutory responsibilities, and to raise the matter of inadequate private sewerage infrastructure sites, such as Galliagh Shore, in the hope that a solution can be found.

Department of Justice

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether she was conveyed to Dublin for a party political meeting on 24 September 2020 by Ministerial car.
(AQW 7626/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): For security reasons it is not appropriate to comment on matters relating to my travel arrangements.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of PSNI officers who have had to move home for security reasons; and to confirm the cost of these security measures, over the past 3 years.
(AQW 7736/17-22)

Mrs Long: There were 11 cases, involving 12 police officers, relating to the Emergency Housing Unit process from September 2017 to September 2020. The cost of the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings Scheme movements from September 2017 to September 2020 for the 12 officers was £85,200.80.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many staff accompanied her on her visit to Dublin to meet the Irish Foreign Minister; and (ii) what were the roles of those staff.
(AQW 7798/17-22)

Mrs Long: I was not accompanied by any support staff.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) when she was informed of the issues around section 52 (indecent assault on a female), section 62 (indecent assault on a male) of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 and section 5(1) of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 (unlawful carnal knowledge of a girl under 17) that led to the setting aside of 15 convictions between 1972 and 2009; and (ii) whether she questioned why it was not contained in her first-day brief.
(AQW 7799/17-22)

Mrs Long: On 22 September 2020 the Public Prosecution Service announced that the convictions of 15 individuals for certain sexual offences prosecuted between 2009 and 2017 are to be set aside as a result of an historical legislative error which caused them to be invalid.

As I said in my statement to the Assembly on 28 September 2020, I was alerted to the issue on 16 June when I was advised that the Public Prosecution Service had confirmed that there was a problem regarding the prosecution of a number of historical offences; that it was reviewing case files and considering options on how best to proceed.

My priority then, as now, was to have assurance that the impact on, and the provision of support to, the victims of the offences was and remained central to PPS decisions on the way forward.

When my first day brief was prepared, there was still a significant degree of uncertainty regarding the implication of the error and, consequently, this issue was not included. I am content that I was fully and properly briefed at the right time.

Rather than looking backwards, it is important now to focus on taking steps to ensure that something like this does not occur again. I have tasked a senior lawyer in the Department to develop a quality-assurance check mechanism that will be built into our policy and bill development processes for future legislation. I have also agreed with the Director of Public Prosecutions that a joint Department of Justice and PPS system review will form part of this work.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) who informed her that the meeting she attended in Dublin on 24 September could not be held online; and (ii) what was the reason given.

(AQW 7800/17-22)

Mrs Long: I travelled to Dublin on 24 September 2020 to meet the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney. I asked in advance if the meeting could be carried out using video conferencing but was advised by his Office that was not possible.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the legislative error resulting in invalid convictions for sexual offences; (i) who within her Department made the decision to withhold the information from the Minister from early March 2020 until 16 June 2020; and (ii) what justification has been given for withholding the information.

(AQW 7829/17-22)

Mrs Long: On 22 September 2020 the Public Prosecution Service announced that the convictions of 15 individuals for certain sexual offences prosecuted between 2009 and 2017 are to be set aside as a result of an historical legislative error which caused them to be invalid.

In my subsequent statement to the Assembly I set out clearly the timeline of how an error – the removal of s 52 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861 from Schedule 2 to the Magistrates Court (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 without a saving provision - was first identified. I highlighted that, when the error was identified, there was a necessary period of activity to confirm whether the error had implications for relevant cases tried in the Magistrates Court, after which there was a subsequent review of case files and further analysis to determine if other offences had been removed from Schedule 2 to the 1981 Order without a saving provision.

No-one made a decision to withhold information from me: I was fully informed when there was a clear picture of the issues involved and the consequences of the error.

It is important that officials are provided with the opportunity to carry out the work necessary to ensure that Ministers are correctly and fully informed. I want to encourage a positive culture in my Department where people are confident of my support when undertaking the often difficult and complex work which they progress and the decisions that they make.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the recent Assembly vote, whether she intends to introduce Helen's Law to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7868/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Prisoners Disclosure of Information about Victims Bill, also known as Helen's Law, will, once passed, place a statutory duty on the Parole Board in England and Wales to consider the non-disclosure of information on where or how an offender disposed of the victim's remains or about the identity of children in indecent photographs as part of its assessment as to whether such an offender should be released on licence.

I very much admire the families of Charlotte Murray and Lisa Dorrian for their courage and commitment in pursuing their campaign to see the introduction of similar legislation here. However, what is legislated for in England and Wales is not always an appropriate fit for Northern Ireland, particularly so in this case.

Operating procedures for the Parole Commissioners differ from those of the Parole Board and Northern Ireland has a different sentencing framework from England and Wales. If any procedural or legislative change is needed, it must be structured to take account of these differences.

It was also apparent from the families' comments and the debate in the Assembly that Helen's Law, currently being progressed in Parliament, is not universally acknowledged as the best way forward.

That is why I have asked officials to carry out a process of engagement with relevant key stakeholders, including, but not limited to, members of Charlotte's and Lisa's families, the Parole Commissioners, the Probation Board and the Prison Service. I will also give careful consideration to the issues raised by Members when the Assembly debated the introduction of legislation similar to Helen's Law on 28 September.

This process will enable me to determine how we address families and Members' concerns in the most effective and appropriate way for Northern Ireland.

I intend that this process should be completed as quickly as possible. Work has already begun and officials held an initial meeting with the families the day after the Assembly debate. I am having a further meeting with them later this month.

I will advise Members and Charlotte's and Lisa's families of my conclusions on the way forward later this year.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, on occasions when she leaves Northern Ireland for a meeting, to detail (i) what additional security measures are provided by the host country to ensure her safety; and (ii) whether her Department or the host country pick up the additional costs.

(AQW 7890/17-22)

Mrs Long: I do not comment on matters relating to my personal security.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether she will consider supporting a Legislative Consent Motion on Helen's Law (The Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill) for Northern Ireland; and (ii) whether she will further consider local legislation following a targeted consultation.

(AQW 7893/17-22)

Mrs Long: I refer the Member to the response to AQW 7868/17-22

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice what discussions she has had with the Minister for Communities on the provision of emergency accommodation for those fleeing domestic violence who have male children over the age of 16.

(AQW 7928/17-22)

Mrs Long: Tackling domestic violence and abuse remains a cross-cutting issue for Government and one which I, as Justice Minister, am committed to addressing. Whilst accommodation issues do not fall within my Department's direct responsibility, it forms part of the wider work being taken forward with Executive colleagues in progressing commitments of the seven year 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse' strategy. Availability of emergency accommodation has also been a particular concern raised during the Covid-19 period and my Department has formed part of the multi-agency response to addressing this issue.

I have been liaising with the Minister for Communities on the matter of accommodation for domestic abuse victims more generally and our need to consider a longer term strategy to help ensure an increased availability. In progressing this area I have asked my officials to liaise with their Departmental colleagues to consider the specific issue you raise.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of written assembly questions her Department has answered since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7975/17-22)

Mrs Long: As of 13 October 2020, I have answered 521 Written Assembly Questions since the restoration of devolution. This represents a 100% response rate with all written questions received, either ordinary or priority written, being answered on time.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of pieces of official Ministerial correspondence she has issued since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7977/17-22)

Mrs Long: As of 14 October 2020, I have issued 828 pieces of correspondence since the restoration of devolution, based on the Department's monitoring system.

These relate to cases which have required a substantive response and does not include internal correspondence with officials, correspondence with the Justice Committee, press releases, media enquiries or responses from my office to invitations requesting a meeting or attendance at events, which are treated separately.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of appearances she has made since the restoration of devolution (i) before the Assembly; and (ii) before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.

(AQW 7978/17-22)

Mrs Long: Since the restoration of devolution I have updated MLAs on my Department's response to COVID-19 on a number of occasions. In addition to responding to Oral Questions, I made an oral statement to the Assembly on 23 March 2020 and I updated the Ad Hoc Committee on 14 May 2020.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of times she has appeared before his Statutory Committee since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7979/17-22)

Mrs Long: Since the restoration of devolution I have appeared before the Committee for Justice on two occasions – 27 February 2020 and 30 April 2020.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Justice how her Department is supporting victims of crime during the COVID-19 pandemic.
(AQW 8017/17-22)

Mrs Long: Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, victims and witnesses have continued to have access to support services.

My Department provides funding of £1.9m to Victim Support Northern Ireland to provide a range of support services to victims and witnesses of crime. From the commencement of lockdown, Victim Support Northern Ireland rapidly transitioned their service delivery from face to face support to providing the same level of support to victims and witnesses by telephone and online, without any detrimental impact to the service delivery.

The range of services available through Victim Support Northern Ireland includes the provision of emotional support, advocacy, information and advice to victims; assistance with claiming Criminal Injuries Compensation; and ongoing help and support to witnesses.

Also, the NSPCC Young Witness Service receives £0.4m to provide support to young prosecution witnesses. Throughout this pandemic, support has continued via telephone calls and remote support via video calls.

Reducing the impact on victims and witnesses has been a key factor in my Department's work to recover the justice system. Therefore, my officials have been engaging with Victim Support Northern Ireland, NSPCC and other stakeholders on a regular basis as the recovery plan has been developed.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how many (i) Protestants; and (ii) Catholics have had their gun permits revoked in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 8087/17-22)

Mrs Long: My department is not responsible for decisions in relation to the revocation of a firearm certificate and does not hold this information. The Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 provides a legislative framework for the control of firearms. A firearm certificate may be revoked or partially revoked by the Chief Constable in accordance with Article 9 of the 2004 Order.

If an appeal against the Chief Constable's decision is made to the Department of Justice under Article 74 of the 2004 Order, appellants are not asked to disclose their religion.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how many ex-republican prisoners have a fire arms permit.

(AQW 8088/17-22)

Mrs Long: My department is not responsible for processing applications for a firearms certificate and does not hold this information. The control of firearms and the grant of a firearm certificate to people living in Northern Ireland is exercised by the Chief Constable. Applications are made to the Chief Constable for the grant of a firearm certificate under Article 4 of the firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how many ex-loyalist prisoners have a fire arms permit.

(AQW 8089/17-22)

Mrs Long: My department is not responsible for processing applications for a firearms certificate and does not hold this information. The control of firearms and the grant of a firearm certificate to people living in Northern Ireland is exercised by the Chief Constable. Applications are made to the Chief Constable for the grant of a firearm certificate under Article 4 of the firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment on the contrasting policing operations in Derry of the Black Lives Matter rally and the anti-mask rally.

(AQW 8180/17-22)

Mrs Long: Operational policing decisions on enforcing public health regulations are a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB). The Chief Constable is operationally independent from me, as Minister of Justice. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the NIPB.

You may be aware that two independent reviews are being undertaken regarding the Police Service of Northern Ireland's (PSNI) response to, and enforcement of, the COVID-19 health regulations.

The NIPB has asked its Human Rights Advisor to conduct a review of the PSNI's response to COVID-19. The overarching aim is to assess and report to the NIPB on the policing approach to the exercise of the new dispersal powers alongside any other operational policing decisions taken in response to COVID-19 that have the potential to impact on public confidence in the service as a whole.

Also, following complaints from members of the public who attended the Black Lives Matter protests at Belfast and Derry/Londonderry on 6 June, the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland is carrying out an investigation into how the PSNI enforced the public health regulations at large public gatherings.

I do believe that it is right to reflect on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on policing, and I welcome the independent reviews and look forward to learning of the reviews' conclusions in due course.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of missing person cases opened by the PSNI in the previous ten years, broken down by (i) those found; (ii) those remaining missing ; and (iii) those found to be deceased.

(AQW 8211/17-22)

Mrs Long: The recording of cases and the associated statistics relating to missing persons 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 Sugden asked the Minister of Justice to detail the process conducted by public services when a person is reported missing to the PSNI.

(AQW 8212/17-22)

Mrs Long: I would refer the Member to my answer to AQW 8213/17-22.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice (i) to detail how (a) the PSNI; and (b) other public services determine the level of risk of an individual reported missing; and (ii) how resources are applied when pursuing a missing person report of a particular level of assessed risk.

(AQW 8213/17-22)

Mrs Long: The determination of the level of risk of a missing person and application of the corresponding resources when pursuing a missing person are both operational matters for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB). I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the NIPB. You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

You may also wish to direct your queries regarding other public services to the relevant organisations.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice what percentage of those reported as a missing person in the last five years, was known to have concerns relating (i) mental health; (ii) addiction; (iii) learning disability; (iv) autism/ASD; and (v) domestic abuse at the point they were reported missing.

(AQW 8214/17-22)

Mrs Long: The recording of cases and the associated statistics relating to missing persons 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 Sugden asked the Minister of Justice to detail those who continue to be reported missing by the PSNI, broken down by (i) age range; (ii) gender; and (iii) nationality.

(AQW 8215/17-22)

Mrs Long: The recording of cases and the associated statistics relating to missing persons 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 Gildernew asked the Minister of Justice to detail the current coroner services.

(AQW 8265/17-22)

Mrs Long: 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.

When a death is reported the Coroner will gather information to establish whether the death was due to natural causes and if a doctor can certify the medical cause of death. If a doctor cannot certify the medical cause of death then the Coroner will investigate the death and may order a post mortem which is a medical examination of the body.

The Coroner will usually decide if an inquest is necessary once the final post mortem report has been received. An inquest is an enquiry into the circumstances surrounding a death where the purpose is to find out who the person was and, how, when and where they died, and to establish the details the Registrar of Deaths needs to register the death.

The Coroners are supported in their role by a team of staff drawn from administrative, legal and medical backgrounds as well as colleagues in the State Pathology Department.

Deaths which are due to Covid-19 are considered to be natural and do not need to be reported to the Coroner. With regard to Covid-19 and business recovery, Coroner's Preliminary Hearings continue and Coroner's inquests are now being listed.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Justice what steps her Department is taking to ensure that victims of sexual violence can obtain legal aid.

(AQW 8291/17-22)

Mrs Long: Criminal legal aid is only available for defendants in criminal proceedings and is not available for victims or witnesses participating in such proceedings.

Legal aid is available, in relevant cases, for a person to seek the protection of the courts through a non-molestation order. This is subject to a means test based on disposable income, but this can be waived.

In addition, and in line with recommendations in the Gillen Review my department is taking forward work to establish a pilot scheme to provide publicly funded legal advice to all adult complainants in serious sexual offence cases. It is my intention that this pilot will be operational from the beginning of April 2021.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 7384/17-22, and in addition to the information held by the Trust (i) why the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) does not keep a record of the number of prisoners committed to CSUs that have been diagnosed with a mental illness or mental health condition; (ii) why the NIPS does not keep a record of the number of prisoners transferred to a secure Mental Health Unit after being accommodated in a CSU; (iii) what types of data the NIPS hold and have access to in relation to prisoners committed to CSUs; (iv) whether the available data would allow the NIPS to show recorded time spent in CSUs alongside information about prisoners; and (v) whether she intends to address deficiencies in the collation of all data relevant to analysis and policy development in the interests of improving mental health outcomes for prisoners.

(AQW 8378/17-22)

Mrs Long: Responsibility for the provision of healthcare to prisoners in Northern Ireland transferred to the Department of Health (then Department of Health, Social Services and Public Services) in April 2008.

Healthcare services, including mental health services, are provided to prisoners in Northern Ireland through the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (the Trust).

The diagnosis of mental illness and mental health conditions for any individual is held confidentially by the Trust and NIPS, appropriately, does not have access to confidential medical information relating to specific mental health diagnosis or specific mental health conditions that a prisoner may have.

The transfer of a prisoner to a secure Mental Health Unit is managed by the Trust and is a health matter. While NIPS works closely with the Trust, as its healthcare partner, the recording of transfers is a matter for the Trust, as the organisation who manages and effects any such transfer.

NIPS holds data on all prisoners relevant to their period(s) of custody and this includes periods during which they may be held in the CSU. Data held includes the following areas: personal details, custodial, security, financial, safer custody, general health, visits and movements.

There are no identified deficiencies in the collation of data relevant to the analysis and policy development in the interests of improving mental health outcomes for prisoners. The Review of Vulnerable People in Custody, which is being taken forward by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), is due to report in May 2021 and will consider data and information provided appropriately by both NIPS and the SEHSCT.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department will insert a question about domestic abuse into the prisoner needs profile for women who are in custody.

(AQW 8452/17-22)

Mrs Long: I would refer the member to the response I provided on 14 October 2020 (AQW 7853/17-22).

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether she was in contact with any of those who tested positive for COVID-19, or any of those who are self-isolating, following her visit to HMP Magilligan on 29 September 2020.

(AQW 8498/17-22)

Mrs Long: I did not visit Magilligan on 29 September 2020.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail the (i) gender breakdown; and (ii) age profile of lay magistrates in the judiciary of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 8528/17-22)

Mrs Long:

There are currently 118 Lay Magistrates in Northern Ireland – 74 Female and 44 Male.

The age profile of Lay Magistrates is as follows:

Age Group	Number
40 - 44	4
45 - 49	18
50 - 54	24
55 - 59	24
60 - 64	23
65 - 69	25

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice to detail what discussions she has had with the PSNI Chief Constable in relation to threats against journalists.

(AQW 8652/17-22)

Mrs Long: Threats to any individual in any sector are totally unacceptable, whatever medium is used and must be condemned.

I meet with the Chief Constable on a regular basis and we discuss a range of issues. You will appreciate however that **investigations into threats against individuals are an operational matter for the Chief Constable. I am advised that there is a PSNI representative on the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, which was set up by the UK Government. It has only been in existence for a short while, and work is ongoing to better understand the scale and depth of such threats across the UK. More long term work is being undertaken to develop a protocol as to how police services will deal with such threats in the future, in an effort to bring consistency of approach.**

I am fully committed to playing my part in addressing this issue where I can, and in respect of online harms and on line communication.

While telecommunications legislation is a reserved matter, my Department is engaged with the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) with regard to the Government White Paper on Online Harms, and in addition I know that the DCMS has asked the Law Commission to ensure the criminal law is fit for purpose to deal with online communications. This will include reviewing the Malicious Communication Act 1988 and the Communications Act 2003.

The Law Commission is currently consulting on provisional proposals for reform, which will include recommendations for new offences. If taken forward, these would apply to abusive emails or posts on social media, or private communications like WhatsApp messages. The Commission will provide final recommendations to DCMS in early 2021, which could inform the government's future position in relation to abusive and harmful online communications.

Department for the Economy

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will publish specific options, compiled by her Department, to provide support to sole traders that have thus far been excluded from COVID-19 business support schemes.

(AQW 6554/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): A paper setting out options for the use of the Covid-19 business support measures underspend was provided to Ministerial colleagues as an Executive paper on 19 June 2020 and was initially discussed by the Executive on 29th June 2020. At the 10th August 2020 Executive meeting it was agreed that further funding allocations would be deferred until September as part of the Executive's work on its Economic Recovery Strategy.

As the paper is part of ongoing policy formulation and the economic recovery package remains under consideration by the Executive, it would be inappropriate to release the paper or detail specific options at this time.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will make a recommendation to the Executive on a proposed scheme to assist sole traders and others thus far excluded from business support schemes.

(AQW 6917/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I remain committed to working with my Executive Colleagues to provide support to as many businesses as possible as we deal with the health, economic and societal impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I submitted an options paper previously to the Executive with further economic policy response proposals as well as options to aid economic recovery.

This is an evolving situation and my Executive Colleagues and I continue to consider appropriate interventions, particularly as we face the prospect of further restrictions and adapt to the frequent changes in public health advice.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she is aware that (a) the Republic of Ireland's tax system does not provide full reciprocity with the UK's tax system with regard to cross-border workers, those employees who live in one jurisdiction and work in the other; and (b) while workers living in Northern Ireland and working in the Republic of Ireland are able to work from home without being subject to double taxation, the same does not apply to workers living in the Republic of Ireland and working in Northern Ireland; and (ii) whether she will undertake to raise the matter with her counterpart in Dublin to seek a reform of the Republic of Ireland's tax laws.

(AQW 7074/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This matter does not fall within the remit of the Department for the Economy. Taxation is a reserved matter. This question should be directed to HMRC to answer.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill has the potential to affect the operations of Invest NI and its use of financial assistance and other support mechanisms to promote economic development and investment.

(AQW 7329/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Until the UK Government provides further guidance on the application of WTO rules in a future UK Subsidy Control Regime and clarity on the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol in relation to State aid, it is not possible to assess the full impact of the Internal Market Bill.

The UK Government has undertaken to provide further guidance for UK public authorities before the end of 2020. Invest NI continues to liaise closely with the Department for the Economy on all potential impacts of the UK's EU exit.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what actions she will take to address the findings in the NI Audit Office Report on Invest NI, which stated that there was potentially £13.5 million paid out in ineligible payments by Invest NI to businesses during the Small Business Grant Scheme.

(AQW 7380/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Small Business Support Scheme, agreed by the NI Executive, was designed and delivered at a rapid pace and in exceptional circumstances. Risks were identified at the outset of the scheme in repurposing rating information for the purposes of support grants. The risk associated with fraud and error and value for money required the Departmental Accounting Officer to seek a Ministerial Direction in order to proceed with the scheme. This was accepted by the Comptroller and Auditor General in the DfE Annual Report and Accounts for 2019-20.

As part of the NIAO audit of the 2019-20 accounts, the payments made by LPS in respect of the total scheme (£220m) were reviewed on a sample basis, which identified some ineligible payments. These ineligible payments, if extrapolated across the total scheme, indicated the potential of up to £13.5m ineligible payments.

The report recognised Department's progress in recovering ineligible payments made to 374 businesses (62 payments recovered, 60 repaid in full, and 2 partial repayments), as well as producing a lessons learned report covering the three business grant schemes and commissioning research on the impact and value for money of its Covid-19 interventions.

My officials are developing a process for dealing with payments that have been wrongfully paid.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to implement the provisions of the EU Work Life Balance Directive within the current mandate.

(AQW 7576/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is not my intention to implement the EU Work Life Balance Directive within the current mandate.

I will consider this matter as part of a wider plan to ensure that our employment legislation takes account of the needs of workers, while balancing the needs of business at this difficult time.

I would point out that aspects of the provisions within the Directive, for example statutory paternity leave and pay, are already enshrined within our existing employment rights framework.

There are many other existing provisions in our employment law framework which support work life balance, notably the right to request flexible working, maternity leave and shared parental leave and pay. Aspects of these go beyond the minimum requirements set out in the EU Work Life Balance Directive. It is also important to remember that good employers go well beyond the statutory minimum entitlements in terms of provisions to support work life balance for their staff.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for the Economy what apprenticeship and upskilling schemes are being put in place by her Department.

(AQW 7600/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Skills are a key driver of economic growth and provide a powerful tool to promote individual opportunity and social inclusion. This is especially true for apprenticeships that meet specific skills needs and provide a route into many careers across the economy.

My Department already supports apprenticeships by funding the cost of off-the-job training from Level 2 to Degree level through both the ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher Level Apprenticeship programmes.

In the current climate, I recognise that ensuring inclusive access to apprenticeships has never been more critical. They will play a significant contribution in providing high quality opportunities, maintaining the skills pipeline and supporting the renewal of the Northern Ireland economy.

This is why the Apprenticeship Recovery Package has been developed to minimise apprenticeship job losses, maintain and grow the supply of apprenticeship opportunities and support apprentices who have been displaced and lost their apprenticeship. The package is bespoke to the needs of our local economy and will help to ensure that our Apprenticeship system bounces back from the devastating impact of the COVID-19 crisis. I have supplemented the £17.2m allocated by my Executive colleagues with Department funds.

I have allocated a total of £14.3m to fund an Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result initiative to encourage the return to work, retention and qualification of up to 4,500 furloughed apprentices in both the ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher Level Apprenticeship programmes. This initiative will begin on 1 November 2020 when the UK wide Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ends. It offers up to £3,700 of support, per apprentice, to employers who return an apprentice from furlough and retain them until they have completed their apprenticeship.

I have allocated £12.5m to fund an Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive initiative that will encourage and support employers to create apprenticeship opportunities for both new apprentices and apprentices who have been made redundant. This initiative offers support of £3,000, to employers, for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.

My Department also launched an Apprenticeship Challenge Fund on 28 September. This fund will support innovative approaches and new collaborations to increase apprenticeship opportunities in Northern Ireland. Successful applicants could receive one off awards of up to £50,000.

Further information on the Apprenticeship Recovery Package is now available on NIBusinessInfo.co.uk, and can be accessed using the following link:

www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-apprenticeship-recovery-package

As the economic impact of Covid-19 began to emerge, I allocated £1.7 million to support the provision of free, flexible, on-line training, aimed at helping up to 2,000 individuals improve their skills, and thus employment opportunities. These courses have been endorsed by employers and have been delivered through our Further and Higher Education institutions. The courses range from entry level to masters, in Digital skills, Employability skills, Leadership and Management, and Health and Social care. As of 7 September, 1031 individuals have commenced their training, with a further 940 due to start in the coming weeks, with all courses due to complete by 30 November.

Following the success of the initial phase of this programme, officials have worked with providers and employer bodies to create further opportunities. To support this, I have allocated £4.6m to provide a further 3,200 training opportunities for individuals whose employment has been disrupted by Covid-19. These courses are in priority economic sectors, and will complete by 31 March 2021.

Developing the skills of our people across Northern Ireland is a key priority for me as we begin the process of rebuilding our economy. These initiatives represent a good start, however we need to take a long term strategic view of our investment in skills. The Department for the Economy is currently developing a new Skills Strategy, which will be published next year and will continue to make the case for a significant increase in funding allocated to skills when we come to consider future Budgets.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy how she intends to ensure areas where major broadband issues exist, such as Newbuildings in Derry, will be urgently improved to a satisfactory level, especially in the context of COVID-19. **(AQW 7668/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds: I fully appreciate the importance of access to good broadband services, particularly in the current circumstances. I expect the contract for Project Stratum to be awarded in October. This will utilise funding of £165m to increase access to 30Mbps broadband services for those premises currently unable to access such services. The project's target intervention area consists of just under 79,000 premises across Northern Ireland. The aspiration of my Department continues to be to maximise broadband coverage throughout Northern Ireland from this funding, along with vital industry contribution, so that as many premises as possible benefit from this public intervention.

However, following the Open Market Review to determine the intervention area for Stratum and a data refresh exercise undertaken by infrastructure providers, I can advise that there is already good broadband provision in the Newbuildings area of Londonderry, using both fixed-line and wireless technologies.

Residents and businesses may check if their premises have been included in the intervention area under Stratum at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/check-if-your-address-might-get-faster-broadband>.

There are a number of other UK Government broadband schemes operating in Northern Ireland and available to both citizens and businesses. These are listed below and links have been provided:

Universal Service Obligation: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-telecoms-and-internet/advice-for-consumers/broadband-iso-need-to-know>

Rural Gigabit Connectivity Scheme: <https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/>.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy for a breakdown by (i) ward area; and (ii) parliamentary constituency of the location of the 80,000 rural homes set to benefit from the proposed £165 million superfast broadband roll-out.

(AQW 7701/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: At this stage of the procurement it is not possible to confirm which premises will benefit from Project Stratum. The precise number and location of premises to benefit from this intervention will be confirmed following contract award. The answers below relate to premises identified as eligible to benefit following an Open Market Review (OMR) and State aid public consultation. There are 78,750 eligible premises across Northern Ireland.

i) The breakdown by ward is shown below.

Constituency	Ward	Eligible Premises
Belfast East	Ballyhanwood	132
Belfast East	Carrowreagh	43
Belfast East	Dundonald	57
Belfast East	Garnerville	3
Belfast East	Gilnahirk	5
Belfast East	Hillfoot	1
Belfast East	Merok	3
Belfast East	Stormont	19
Belfast North	Burnthill	3
Belfast North	Collinbridge	1
Belfast North	Glengormley	3
Belfast North	Legoniel	64
Belfast North	Valley	37
Belfast South	Beechill	87
Belfast South	Cairnshill	2
Belfast South	Carryduff East	3
Belfast South	Carryduff West	9
Belfast South	Cregagh	2
Belfast South	Finaghy	4
Belfast South	Hillfoot	3
Belfast South	Knockbracken	3
Belfast South	Upper Malone	9
Belfast West	Ballygomartin	4
Belfast West	Collin Glen	6
Belfast West	Poleglass	22
Belfast West	Stonyford	51
Belfast West	Turf Lodge	11
East Antrim	Abbey	8
East Antrim	Ballycarry And Glynn	140
East Antrim	Cairncastle	189
East Antrim	Carnlough And Glenarm	385
East Antrim	Castle	1

Constituency	Ward	Eligible Premises
East Antrim	Gardenmore	16
East Antrim	Glenwhirry	39
East Antrim	Greenisland	1
East Antrim	Islandmagee	113
East Antrim	Kilroot	36
East Antrim	Kilwaughter	134
East Antrim	Lurigethan	266
East Antrim	Rostulla	242
East Antrim	Slemish	21
East Antrim	The Maidens	15
East Antrim	Torr Head And Rathlin	222
East Antrim	Victoria	33
East Antrim	Whitehead South	17
East Antrim	Woodburn	78
East Londonderry	Aghadowey	508
East Londonderry	Altahullion	36
East Londonderry	Atlantic	160
East Londonderry	Ballykelly	35
East Londonderry	Castlerock	64
East Londonderry	Churchland	1
East Londonderry	Claudy	46
East Londonderry	Drumsum	24
East Londonderry	Dundoan	455
East Londonderry	Dungiven	39
East Londonderry	Feeny	28
East Londonderry	Garvagh	388
East Londonderry	Greysteel	37
East Londonderry	Hopefield	2
East Londonderry	Kilrea	510
East Londonderry	Macosquin	453
East Londonderry	Magilligan	109
East Londonderry	Park	59
East Londonderry	Portrush And Dunluce	70
East Londonderry	Portstewart	18
East Londonderry	Quarry	2
East Londonderry	University	5
East Londonderry	Windy Hall	19
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Augher And Clogher	515
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Aughnacloy	482
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Ballinamallard	268
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Ballygawley	424

Constituency	Ward	Eligible Premises
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Ballysaggart	11
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Belcoo And Garrison	572
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Belleek And Boa	674
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Boho Cleenish And Letterbreen	609
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Brookeborough	567
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Caledon	653
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Castlecaulfield	235
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Castlecoole	28
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Derrygonnelly	603
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Derrylin	546
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Donagh	593
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Ederney And Kesh	358
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Erne	5
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Fivemiletown	605
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Florence Court And Kinawley	721
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Irvinestown	336
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Killyman	285
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Killymeal	42
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Lisbellaw	323
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Lisnarrick	400
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Loughgall	30
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Maguiresbridge	718
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Moy	255
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Moygashel	60
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Mullaghmore	108
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Newtownbutler	523
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Portora	9
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Rosslea	537
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Rossorry	58
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	Tempo	593
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	The Birches	95
Foyle	Ballymagroarty	1
Foyle	Eglinton	10
Foyle	Enagh	46
Foyle	New Buildings	2
Foyle	Sheriff's Mountain	12
Foyle	Slievekirk	32
Lagan Valley	Ballinderry	201
Lagan Valley	Ballymacbrennan	329
Lagan Valley	Ballymacoss	7
Lagan Valley	Ballyward	44

Constituency	Ward	Eligible Premises
Lagan Valley	Belvoir	2
Lagan Valley	Blaris	64
Lagan Valley	Donaghcloney	35
Lagan Valley	Dromara	357
Lagan Valley	Dromore	54
Lagan Valley	Drumbo	166
Lagan Valley	Dunmurry	2
Lagan Valley	Gransha	402
Lagan Valley	Harmony Hill	50
Lagan Valley	Hilden	7
Lagan Valley	Hillhall	48
Lagan Valley	Hillsborough	157
Lagan Valley	Knockmore	10
Lagan Valley	Lagan	351
Lagan Valley	Lambeg	13
Lagan Valley	Lisnagarvey	2
Lagan Valley	Maghaberry	243
Lagan Valley	Magheralave	6
Lagan Valley	Maze	117
Lagan Valley	Moira	4
Lagan Valley	Quilly	448
Lagan Valley	Ravernet	302
Lagan Valley	Stonyford	134
Lagan Valley	Wallace Park	30
Lagan Valley	White Mountain	155
Mid Ulster	Ardboe	388
Mid Ulster	Ballygawley	89
Mid Ulster	Ballymaguigan	341
Mid Ulster	Bellaghy	304
Mid Ulster	Castlecaulfield	130
Mid Ulster	Castledawson	257
Mid Ulster	Coagh	233
Mid Ulster	Coalisland North	142
Mid Ulster	Coalisland South	4
Mid Ulster	Cookstown East	56
Mid Ulster	Cookstown South	5
Mid Ulster	Cookstown West	6
Mid Ulster	Coolshinny	512
Mid Ulster	Donaghmore	514
Mid Ulster	Draperstown	246
Mid Ulster	Glebe	10

Constituency	Ward	Eligible Premises
Mid Ulster	Killyman	51
Mid Ulster	Killymeal	13
Mid Ulster	Lissan	527
Mid Ulster	Loughry	150
Mid Ulster	Lower Glenshane	474
Mid Ulster	Maghera	4
Mid Ulster	Oaklands	680
Mid Ulster	Pomeroy	606
Mid Ulster	Stewartstown	466
Mid Ulster	Swatragh	515
Mid Ulster	Tamlaght O'crilly	458
Mid Ulster	The Loup	486
Mid Ulster	Tobermore	582
Mid Ulster	Town Parks East	7
Mid Ulster	Valley	347
Mid Ulster	Washing Bay	365
Newry And Armagh	Abbey	14
Newry And Armagh	Ballybot	1
Newry And Armagh	Bessbrook	3
Newry And Armagh	Blackwatertown	821
Newry And Armagh	Camlough	292
Newry And Armagh	Cathedral	4
Newry And Armagh	Crossmaglen	305
Newry And Armagh	Damolly	17
Newry And Armagh	Demesne	24
Newry And Armagh	Drumalane	7
Newry And Armagh	Fathom	435
Newry And Armagh	Forkhill	347
Newry And Armagh	Hamiltonsbawn	716
Newry And Armagh	Keady	496
Newry And Armagh	Loughbrickland	68
Newry And Armagh	Loughgall	447
Newry And Armagh	Mahon	47
Newry And Armagh	Markethill	738
Newry And Armagh	Mayobridge	11
Newry And Armagh	Mullaghbane	335
Newry And Armagh	Navan	733
Newry And Armagh	Newtownhamilton	686
Newry And Armagh	Richhill	324
Newry And Armagh	Seagahan	775
Newry And Armagh	St. Patrick's	3

Constituency	Ward	Eligible Premises
Newry And Armagh	Tandragee	42
Newry And Armagh	The Mall	29
Newry And Armagh	Whitecross	607
North Antrim	Academy	19
North Antrim	Ahoghill	20
North Antrim	Ardeevin	1
North Antrim	Ballee And Harryville	4
North Antrim	Ballymoney East	1
North Antrim	Ballymoney North	1
North Antrim	Ballymoney South	50
North Antrim	Braidwater	5
North Antrim	Broughshane	96
North Antrim	Castle Demesne	66
North Antrim	Clogh Mills	247
North Antrim	Cullybackey	20
North Antrim	Dervock	249
North Antrim	Dunloy	437
North Antrim	Fair Green	2
North Antrim	Galgorm	62
North Antrim	Giant's Causeway	183
North Antrim	Glenravel	367
North Antrim	Glenwhirry	454
North Antrim	Grange	653
North Antrim	Kells	132
North Antrim	Kinbane	493
North Antrim	Kirkinriola	365
North Antrim	Loughguile And Stranocum	412
North Antrim	Maine	440
North Antrim	Portglenone	316
North Antrim	Rasharkin	451
North Antrim	Route	190
North Antrim	Slemish	648
North Antrim	Torr Head And Rathlin	389
North Down	Ballygrainey	51
North Down	Broadway	1
North Down	Clandeboye	72
North Down	Cultra	197
North Down	Groomspoint	125
North Down	Harbour	1
North Down	Helen's Bay	81
North Down	Hollywood	26

Constituency	Ward	Eligible Premises
North Down	Kilcooley	1
North Down	Loughries	117
North Down	Loughview	15
North Down	Warren	141
South Antrim	Aldergrove	557
South Antrim	Antrim Centre	28
South Antrim	Ballynure	103
South Antrim	Ballyrobert	96
South Antrim	Burnthill	2
South Antrim	Clady	465
South Antrim	Cranfield	584
South Antrim	Crumlin	28
South Antrim	Doagh	51
South Antrim	Fountain Hill	68
South Antrim	Glenavy	215
South Antrim	Greystone	106
South Antrim	Hightown	3
South Antrim	Jordanstown	21
South Antrim	Mallusk	78
South Antrim	Mossley	28
South Antrim	Parkgate	648
South Antrim	Randalstown	263
South Antrim	Shilvodan	727
South Antrim	Springfarm	17
South Antrim	Steeple	32
South Antrim	Stiles	67
South Antrim	Stonyford	363
South Antrim	Templepatrick	280
South Antrim	Toome	519
South Down	Annalong	445
South Down	Ballydugan	601
South Down	Ballyward	1,038
South Down	Banbridge East	257
South Down	Binnian	363
South Down	Burren	193
South Down	Castlewellan	238
South Down	Cathedral	48
South Down	Crossgar And Killyleagh	53
South Down	Derryleckagh	234
South Down	Donard	43
South Down	Dromara	6

Constituency	Ward	Eligible Premises
South Down	Drumaness	285
South Down	Dundrum	339
South Down	Gransha	247
South Down	Hilltown	584
South Down	Kilkeel	35
South Down	Knocknashinna	9
South Down	Lecale	356
South Down	Lisnacree	650
South Down	Loughbrickland	321
South Down	Mayobridge	551
South Down	Murlough	55
South Down	Quoile	282
South Down	Rathfriland	481
South Down	Rostrevor	175
South Down	Strangford	596
South Down	Tollymore	718
South Down	Warrenpoint	8
Strangford	Ballygowan	274
Strangford	Ballygrainey	3
Strangford	Ballywalter	289
Strangford	Ballyward	1
Strangford	Carrowdore	465
Strangford	Carryduff East	119
Strangford	Comber North	38
Strangford	Comber South	236
Strangford	Comber West	36
Strangford	Conway Square	8
Strangford	Crossgar And Killyleagh	12
Strangford	Derryboy	486
Strangford	Glen	16
Strangford	Killinchy	444
Strangford	Kilmore	524
Strangford	Kircubbin	379
Strangford	Loughries	148
Strangford	Moneyreagh	157
Strangford	Movilla	1
Strangford	Portaferry	312
Strangford	Portavogie	130
Strangford	Saintfield	97
Strangford	Scrabo	159
Strangford	West Winds	9

Constituency	Ward	Eligible Premises
Upper Bann	Aghagallon	348
Upper Bann	Ballybay	31
Upper Bann	Banbridge East	52
Upper Bann	Banbridge North	27
Upper Bann	Banbridge South	2
Upper Bann	Bleary	194
Upper Bann	Brownlow	1
Upper Bann	Craigavon Centre	76
Upper Bann	Derrytrasna	157
Upper Bann	Donaghcloney	375
Upper Bann	Gilford	348
Upper Bann	Kernan	30
Upper Bann	Lagan	1
Upper Bann	Lough Road	4
Upper Bann	Loughbrickland	320
Upper Bann	Magheralin	166
Upper Bann	Mahon	140
Upper Bann	Mourneview	3
Upper Bann	Parklake	2
Upper Bann	The Birches	374
Upper Bann	Waringstown	32
West Tyrone	Artigarvan	275
West Tyrone	Beragh	563
West Tyrone	Camowen	33
West Tyrone	Castlederg	76
West Tyrone	Dergmoney	12
West Tyrone	Dromore	266
West Tyrone	Drumnakilly	323
West Tyrone	Drumquin	595
West Tyrone	Dunnamanagh	666
West Tyrone	Fairy Water	780
West Tyrone	Finn	267
West Tyrone	Fintona	392
West Tyrone	Glenderg	842
West Tyrone	Glenelly Valley	848
West Tyrone	Gortin	481
West Tyrone	Gortrush	115
West Tyrone	Newtownsaville	682
West Tyrone	Newtownstewart	404
West Tyrone	Owenkillew	553
West Tyrone	Sion Mills	120

Constituency	Ward	Eligible Premises
West Tyrone	Sixmilecross	553
West Tyrone	Slievekirk	81
West Tyrone	Strabane North	2
West Tyrone	Strule	4
West Tyrone	Termon	426
West Tyrone	Trillick	614

ii) The breakdown by Constituency is shown below.

Constituency	Eligible Premises
Belfast East	263
Belfast North	108
Belfast South	122
Belfast West	94
East Antrim	1,956
East Londonderry	3,068
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	12,841
Foyle	103
Lagan Valley	3,740
Mid Ulster	8,968
Newry And Armagh	8,327
North Antrim	6,773
North Down	828
South Antrim	5,349
South Down	9,211
Strangford	4,343
Upper Bann	2,683
West Tyrone	9,973

Residents and businesses may check if their premises have been included in the intervention area under Stratum at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/check-if-your-address-might-get-faster-broadband> .

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how much funding the Centre for Gender Politics at Queen's University Belfast has received (i) directly from her Department; and (ii) from Queen's University.
(AQW 7726/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department does not provide research funding directly to the Centre for Gender Politics at QUB, nor does it hold information on funding allocated to the Centre by Queen's University.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy to detail all correspondence between her Department and the National Museum of the Royal Navy regarding the marketing of HMS Caroline, in each of the last 3 years.
(AQW 7730/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There has been extensive correspondence over the last 3 years between the Department and the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) regarding HMS Caroline (HMSC). This includes a significant volume of correspondence on the operational issues involved in running HMS Caroline, and the marketing of the visitor attraction would have been just one of a number of matters covered in this correspondence. It would not be practicable to separate all of the correspondence relating to marketing issues without having to commit a significant amount of staff time and this would detract staff from progressing other work on options going forward.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will instruct Invest NI to ensure that companies obtaining financial assistance have a sufficiently independent relationship with their auditors and that auditor independence is not compromised, for example, by the auditor being dependent on that client for the majority of their income.

(AQW 7762/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Auditors are appointed by shareholders of a company as determined by company legislation. Invest NI does not have a role in determining who client companies should appoint as auditors.

The responsibility for all matters relating to Audit Regulation, including audit independence, is reserved to a "Competent Authority", which in the U.K. is the Financial Reporting Council (FRC). The FRC has delegated certain of the audit regulation tasks to the Recognised Supervisory Bodies (RSB).

The Accountancy Institutes are all Recognised Supervisory Bodies (RSBs) in the UK for the purposes of regulating auditors.

Statutory audit is protected by a legal framework and all statutory auditors (and audit firms carrying out statutory audit) must be registered with a Recognised Supervisory Body (RSB) and agree to be bound by all relevant regulations, guidance rules and procedures and must place themselves within the jurisdiction of their enforcement procedure.

The firms are also required to follow the Competent Authority's ethical standards which contains guidance on the matters that can threaten a registered auditor's independence including guidance relating to the proportion of fees generated from any one audit client.

RSBs monitor and review the registered auditors to ensure that they comply with the regulations and standards which require them to carry out audit work with integrity and to be, and be seen to be, independent.

Complaints about the performance of an auditor can be referred to the relevant RSB, each of which has a strict complaints procedure to handle specific complaints about individual audit firms.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy when (i) AQW 6464/17-22; (ii) AQW 6917/17-22; (iii) AQW 6555/17-22; and (iv) AQW 6554/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 7791/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- AQW 6464 was answered on 06/10/2020
- AQW 6917 was answered on 09/10/2020
- AQW 6555 was answered on 02/10/2020
- AQW 6554 was answered on 14/10/2020

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy what further support can be given to travel agents who have been operating to furnish customers with refunds.

(AQW 7832/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 7793/17-22.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 7265/17-22; (i) whether the use of the term licence holders in the tender specification for the Department's proposed research project forms an implicit or explicit recommendation that licences be granted; and (ii) to clarify what is meant by the term licence holders in the context of the tender specification.

(AQW 7966/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The original tender specification for the research into the impacts of petroleum licensing in Northern Ireland was drafted at a point in time when Petroleum Licence (PL1/10) in Northern Ireland was in existence. As such, the Department reasonably considered the holder of licence PL1/10 to be a stakeholder in this research.

Following the relinquishment of PL1/10 on 28th April 2020, due to an administrative oversight, the Department failed to remove the reference to licence holder from its list of stakeholders.

The final wording of the tender specification is not an implicit nor explicit indication that the Department intended to issue any further licences prior to the research being completed. Indeed, the tender specification makes it clear that the research will inform considerations of PLA1/16 and PLA2/16.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for the Economy whether the Skills Barometer, which has been commissioned by her Department, is likely to be updated to reflect the impact of COVID-19.

(AQW 8022/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Skills Barometer is produced by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) and is built upon a significant amount of labour market and skills data alongside an economic forecasting model to identify potential skill mismatches at relatively detailed disaggregated levels. This was further enhanced with an extension of the analysis to include sub-regions of Northern Ireland.

You will be aware that the latest Skills Barometer was produced just prior to the pandemic crisis. These are unprecedented times and the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis to date are still feeding through into the data that would be used by UUEPC. Unfortunately, I think we all expect further significant impacts on our labour market and our economy which will change the picture, and the data, even more.

The technical production of the Skills Barometer is extremely challenging in normal times, benefiting from a host of reliable and up-to-date data sources and a fair degree of stability and predictability. With a very turbulent and live labour market situation it would not be feasible for UUEPC to reliably update the Skills Barometer at this point in time.

However, I want to assure the Member that the Skills Barometer very much remains part of my Department's and Ulster University's plans going forward and it will be a key piece of evidence that will be drawn upon to inform the development of a new Skills Strategy.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether implementation of the proposed skills strategy will include actions to address the skills and needs identified by the Skills Barometer at sub-regional level; and (ii) whether such actions will be agreed through engagement with district councils.

(AQW 8023/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My officials are continuing to work on the development of a new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland and are currently engaging with colleagues across Government and with representatives of the business, education and trade union communities.

I do not wish to pre-empt the outcomes of ongoing policy development or indeed the results of the public consultation which is expected early next year. I can confirm, however, that emerging proposals place the Skills Barometer at the centre of our evidence base as we set out our ambition to develop a skills system that can support Northern Ireland's economic ambition and enable all our citizens to achieve their potential.

Building on the recommendations contained in the OECD's 'Skills Strategy Northern Ireland', my officials are considering how we can strengthen our ties with local government in the areas of education, skills and employability. My officials hope to engage substantively with local government representatives in the near future to discuss how we can achieve greater strategic coherence in the implementation of regional and sub-regional skills policy to meet the needs of small businesses and communities through the community planning process.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions her Department has had with (i) HM Treasury; or (ii) any other UK Government Department in relation to further financial support for the aviation sector.

(AQW 8027/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To clarify, I am not responsible for the funding of airports, that work is led by the Department of Finance and the Department for Infrastructure. My responsibility is with maintaining and enhancing Northern Ireland's air connectivity, both domestically and internationally. In doing so, I fully acknowledge that civil aviation is a reserved matter for the UK Department for Transport (DfT).

I have, and will continue to stress to the UK Government my view, and that of previous NI Ministers, that short haul Air Passenger Duty (APD) is an unfair tax, which has a particularly detrimental impact on NI passengers. I have written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer requesting a deferral of short haul APD, as part of a national solution to COVID-19. I, and my officials continue to engage with DfT, and the other devolved administrations, on measures to support rebuilding our regional air connectivity. This included officials participating in DfT's Aviation Expert Steering Group and relevant sub-groups, during which they highlighted policy areas which would have a positive impact on NI air connectivity.

I understand that DfT intends to publish its UK Aviation Recovery Plan in the autumn. My officials continue to engage with them on their Regional Air Connectivity Review, which was announced in January.

I fully recognise that air connectivity is essential to rebuilding Northern Ireland's economy and my Department is always willing to consider any requests for support from airports/airlines that deliver value for money and are compliant with EU State Aid regulations.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy when the website of the Economic Advisory Group will go live.

(AQW 8036/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I established the Economic Advisory Group in June 2020 to provide me with independent advice, aimed at challenging and developing public policy and strategic thinking on the economy. It is not anticipated that their work will be published on a dedicated website.

An area of the DfE website will be available to the Group for any documentation which requires circulation to a wider audience.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of written assembly questions her Department has answered since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 8037/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since the restoration of Devolution I have answered 723 written questions.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of pieces of official Ministerial correspondence she has issued since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 8038/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: At 7 October 2020, I have issued 2,574 pieces of correspondence based on the Departmental correspondence monitoring system. These relate to cases which have required a substantive response and does not include internal correspondence with officials, or responses from my office to invitations requesting a meeting or attendance at events, which are treated separately.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what preparations have been undertaken to provide support to businesses in areas of heightened COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 8074/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I met with businesses in the North West last Friday and heard about the impacts these new restrictions will have on their businesses. These businesses want, and need, to be open and trading.

The Executive recognises that these restrictions will have an adverse impact on businesses and the local economy. A support package to provide assistance to businesses within the Derry City and Strabane District Council area has been announced by the Finance Minister on 7th October and will be operational within days.

It is important that any further support measures are considered within the ever changing context we are operating in and we must retain maximum flexibility to adapt to the frequent changes in virus spread and public health advice.

I accept that more needs to be done, and I will be making further representations to UK Government on the need for greater support measures for our economy.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for the Economy what guidance and evidence is being used to mandate the wearing of face masks in Further Education colleges; and whether it applies to both staff and students.

(AQW 8121/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The wearing of face coverings or face masks is not mandated in Further Education (FE) colleges for either staff or students. In August, guidance which is specific to the context of and challenges faced by the FE sector, underpinned by clear and unequivocal advice that my Department sought from the Public Health Agency (PHA), was published in a Framework for the Safe Resumption of On-site Educational Provision and Related Activity (Framework Document). This guidance will be kept under review to keep abreast of the most up to date advice provided by the PHA and Northern Ireland Executive.

The guidance in the Framework Document is that if social distancing of 2 metres can be maintained in provider settings, there is no need for face coverings to be mandatory.

However, if staff or learners cannot maintain 2 metres separation, other mitigations to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 must be implemented. These mitigations may include the use by staff or learners of additional PPE, face coverings, Perspex screens etc.

In addition given the increasing use of face coverings in the wider community, and as a measure of confidence, the Framework Document does record that while it does not specify particular situations in which face coverings are mandatory, where possible, providers should encourage the wearing of face coverings for all staff, students and visitors, particularly in enclosed spaces within the provider's premises.

This Framework Document can be found online at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/framework-safe-resumption-site-educational-provision-and-related-activity> should you wish to view it.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether (i) she supports a social partnership approach in determining economic policy; (ii) she views trade unions as a full partner in determining economic policy; and (iii) she is committed to open and full engagement with trade unions as she develops short and long-term economic policy.

(AQW 8181/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am fully committed to open and full engagement with all key stakeholders, including trade unions, 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 local Trade Unions, and social partnerships, 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, improving our economic performance and addressing social inequalities.

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 and local chambers of commerce.

This has been running since June 2017 and allows the Department to seek stakeholder views and to collectively discuss how best to work together as EU Exit advances. Going forward this forum will be a key asset in informing our approach to rebuilding a stronger economy.

My Department and I will continue to engage with our Trade Union and other key partners as we develop the work plan to rebuild our economy and develop longer-term economic policy. This collaboration and engagement will be crucial if we are to succeed in our ambitions for Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for the Economy what employment advice is given to parents, unable to work from home, whose child has to self-isolate due to COVID-19 cases in school.

(AQW 8230/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Direct responsibility for policy matters relating to self-isolation and shielding fall to the Department of Health and the Department for Communities. However, I can confirm that shielding persons, or those with caring responsibilities, are entitled to the same basic employment rights as everyone else, which includes the right to complain to an Industrial Tribunal if they believe the terms of their employment contract have been breached.

These rights also include unpaid time off to deal with an emergency involving a dependent. The amount of time off an employee takes should be reasonable for the situation. For example, they might take 2 days off to start with and if more time is needed they can book holiday.

Some employers may offer paid emergency leave but this will depend on the contract or workplace policy. It is more important than ever for employers and employees to work together in order to help deal with any disruption that may be caused by a child having to self-isolate due to COVID-19 cases in school. In such circumstances, employers and employees could explore and agree flexible working arrangements. Workplace policies could also be reviewed in order to help plan for and alleviate any sudden disruption to working or caring arrangements.

Guidance for employers and employees is published, and regularly updated, on the website of the Labour Relations Agency at <https://www.lra.org.uk/covid-19-advice-employers-and-employees#section-823>.

Further information is also available on NI Direct at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-workers>.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy to detail any funding streams which are available to a business to carry out disability access works.

(AQW 8244/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Although my Department does not directly provide funding for businesses who carry out disability access works, through Invest NI, support towards wider building costs is available through the Selective Financial Assistance Capital Grant, Tourism Development and Property Assistance Schemes. These grants can often include elements required to enhance or provide what would be considered as disability access works as part of the wider improvements being undertaken.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what progress has been made with the smart meter roll out announced by her predecessor in August 2012; and (ii) whether the EU was notified of the positive outcome of the cost-benefit analysis of the smart meter roll out carried out at that time.

(AQW 8254/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) A Cost/Benefit Analysis (CBA) was commissioned by the Utility Regulator in 2011, which showed a marginal case for the roll out of electricity smart meters in Northern Ireland but a negative case for gas. Subsequently, a reassessed CBA for electricity smart meters was undertaken by the Department in 2016, which showed a negative outcome based on updated costs and expected benefits for consumers. As a result, the roll out of smart meters in Northern Ireland is not currently taking place. The position going forward will be determined following a new Energy Strategy.
- (ii) Smart meter rollout at the time was being driven by the European Commission under Directives 2009/72 for electricity and 2009/73 for gas. As the requirement was on the United Kingdom as a Member State, it would not have been for Northern Ireland to notify the EU on the outcome of the CBA.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy how her Department plans to support adults without basic numeracy or literacy skills.

(AQW 8258/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department's Essential Skills Strategy focuses on the needs of adults and, in particular, those who have low levels of literacy, numeracy and ICT. Essential Skills qualifications in literacy and numeracy from Entry Level to Level 2 are available free of charge to all learners. Courses are delivered by Further Education (FE) colleges, private training providers

and community organisations. These courses are designed to help improve reading, writing, use of mathematics and computer skills for anyone over the age of 16.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the impact that the proposed removal of permitted development rights by the Minister for Infrastructure on oil and gas exploration would have on petroleum licencing in Northern Ireland; and (ii) for her assessment of the effect that this policy announcement will have on the two petroleum licence applications currently being considered by her Department (PLA1/16 and PLA2/16).

(AQW 8279/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- i) Although it may have impacts for exploration companies in terms of additional requirements for various exploration activities, the removal of Permitted Development Rights (PDR) for oil and gas exploration will have limited impact on petroleum licensing in Northern Ireland. My Department is responsible for petroleum licensing and that process is completed in advance of any requirement in terms of planning consents.
- ii) At this stage, the removal of Permitted Development Rights has no bearing on the two current petroleum licence applications. My Department is currently assessing the two applications and I have made it clear that no decision will be made on these prior to the completion of the ongoing review of the petroleum licensing regime in Northern Ireland.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the reasons for the 38 per cent fall in Republic of Ireland students enrolled in Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions from 2011/12 to 2015/16; (ii) what action she intends to take in response to this, along with Northern Ireland Institutions; (iii) whether she is concerned by this; and (iv) whether she can publish more up to date statistics.

(AQW 8287/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The 38% fall in Republic of Ireland students enrolled in Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions from 2011/12 to 2015/16 is largely due to a reduction in the number of Irish undergraduate students enrolled on a part-time basis in Northern Ireland. The statistics confirm that whilst there have been drops in several subject areas, the major reduction is in the number of undergraduate students enrolled in Business and Administrative Studies and in subjects allied to medicine for postgraduate studies.

I will continue to liaise with the Irish Government on matters of mutual interest.

My Department, along with the Irish Department of Education and Skills, funds the Secretariat of Universities Ireland to support it in pursuing its aims of cross border mobility. I will continue to review the effectiveness of this funding in relation to the outcomes delivered.

I am interested to note the trends in relation to both Republic of Ireland students who study at higher education establishments in Northern Ireland and vice versa. As autonomous bodies our local Higher Education Institutions are responsible for pursuing their own strategies and my officials will continue to work together with them to encourage student mobility.

My Department publishes a range of statistical information. The most up to date information on enrolments for the year 2018-19 can be found in the attached link.

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/enrolments-uk-higher-education-institutions-northern-ireland-analysis-201819>

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the extension of the Coronavirus Act 2020 as per her recent engagements with the Irish League of Credit Unions.

(AQW 8289/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The credit union sector plays a vital role in our community, and I am committed to ensuring they can continue to operate throughout these difficult times.

I have approved an extension to the provisions in the Corporate Governance and Insolvency Act 2020, extending the temporary meetings measures for mutuals until 30 December 2020.

The Regulations came into operation on 1 October 2020, although this Statutory Rule must be approved by the Assembly within 40 days. My officials are making the necessary arrangements for this.

This information has been sent to stakeholders and posted on the Departmental website (<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/credit-unions-and-societies>);

and the legislation can be viewed here: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2020/211/introduction/made>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the increase in online classes in higher education, to detail the conversations she has had with the Executive and universities regarding reducing tuition fees.

(AQW 8339/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department is responsible for determining the annual maximum tuition fee level that can be charged by higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, it is a decision for the higher education institutions to determine what

tuition fee levels they wish to charge Northern Ireland and EU domiciled students, up to that maximum level. This includes any decision regarding whether a student should receive a refund or reduction of this fee. I do not have a remit to intervene in these matters, and have therefore had no conversations with the Executive or the universities regarding reducing tuition fees.

However, the higher education institutions have assured me that they are committed to ensuring high academic standards, excellent teaching and learning provision, and a high quality student experience.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has engaged with universities in Northern Ireland regarding the spread of COVID-19 in higher education.

(AQW 8342/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Our higher education institutions (HEIs) are responsible for their own procedures and protocols for delivering learning and accommodating students, without direction from my Department. That said, I and my officials are in very regular contact with our universities and university colleges, and I have sought assurances from them on provision for a safe opening. My officials, along with the universities, have also been participating in the Executive Office's Covid-19 Strategic Enforcement Group. For the past couple of weeks, this group has had higher education as a key agenda point, in order to discuss actions to help minimise the spread of Covid-19.

All HEIs have confirmed that the health, safety and wellbeing of their staff and students is their first priority. Plans for a safe return to campus have been developed in accordance with the NI Executive's Pathway to Recovery plan, and are in adherence to all guidelines issued by the Public Health Agency.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to replicate the UK Prime Minister's commitment to generate 100 per cent of electricity in England from renewable sources by 2030.

(AQW 8386/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I welcome the Prime Minister's recognition of the importance of renewable electricity for decarbonising our energy sector, which I share. Indeed, I recently stated that I believed that any new Northern Ireland renewable electricity target should be at least 70% by 2030.

I would highlight that the Prime Minister has not to date set a formal target of 100% of electricity from renewable sources by 2030 for England. Rather, his commitment was about a target for the capacity of offshore wind that that would be in place by 2030 and the belief that this would power every home.

It is important to understand that any commitments around future renewable electricity generation will have significant cost implications for local consumers. Such decisions must therefore be carefully thought through, and this is why the Power Working Group – established to inform the development of the Energy Strategy – is looking specifically at the evidence around options for a future renewable electricity target.

Further detail on a future renewable electricity target will be made available in the options consultation for a new Energy Strategy in March 2021.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether the procurement exercise for the research into the impacts of petroleum development in Northern Ireland has been paused by her Department; and (ii) if so, to detail the reasons why.

(AQW 8456/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has commenced a wide-ranging review of our petroleum licensing regime. This review is being undertaken in accordance with the Executive's policy development toolkit, with the aim of establishing a robust, evidence base from which to develop policy options for any future petroleum licensing regime. The review identified a need for independent research into the socio-economic and environmental positive or negative effects of petroleum exploration and extraction.

While procurement of that research was underway, the Department received communication from a member of the public who raised concerns in connection with a range of issues on petroleum policy including the award of the research. This communication is being dealt with under the Department's Raising Concerns Policy.

The Departmental Director of Corporate Governance, who is an independent senior official, has completed preliminary inquiries into the issues raised in relation to the research contract and found no evidence to substantiate the concerns.

The Department is currently working through the final stages of the procurement exercise and intends to award the contract for the research in the coming days.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, given that most teaching has moved online, (i) what discussions she has had with Queen's University Belfast regarding tuition and accommodation fees; and (ii) for her assessment on whether students should receive rebates on these.

(AQW 8463/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department is responsible for determining the annual maximum tuition fee level that can be charged by higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, it is a decision for the higher education institutions to determine what they

wish to charge Northern Ireland and EU domiciled students, up to that maximum level. This includes any decision regarding whether a student should receive a refund of this fee.

Moreover, my Department has no role in determining the cost of student accommodation, whether that is for university-managed Halls of Residence or private rental.

Given that I have no remit to intervene in these matters, I have therefore had no discussions with Queen's University regarding tuition or accommodation fees.

However, Queen's University has assured me that they are committed to ensuring high academic standards, excellent teaching and learning provision, and a high quality student experience.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how much funding remains in the Student Hardship Fund; and (ii) how many payments have been made from the fund to students since 15 March 2020.
(AQW 8494/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) My Department has made available £5.6m for student hardship in the 2020/21 financial year. A total of £2.34m has been drawn down to date by the higher education institutions (HEIs). The remaining balance of the fund is £3.26m for the remainder of the financial year.
- (ii) These funds are administered by the HEIs, and my officials have requested an update on the current position with regards to the number of payments that have issued to students since 15 March 2020. I will write to you again to provide this information, once received.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for the Economy what plans her Department has to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021.
(AQO 897/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Planning for the Centenary of Northern Ireland continues to gather pace and proposals are currently being finalised that will ensure 2021 is a year of celebration and economic success.

A number of events have been identified by Invest NI and Tourism NI that we will use as a springboard to re-establish Northern Ireland on the global economic stage.

We are also working closely with the Northern Ireland Office and I hope that in the near future the UK Government will be in a position to announce details of a number of significant events aimed at celebrating the centenary of the UK and promoting our economic recovery.

The Centenary represents an opportunity to lay the foundations of our economic recovery, following the devastating effects of the pandemic. If we choose to come together on this issue 2021 could be remembered as the year that we created a new economic vision for Northern Ireland and a new economic future for all of our young people.

Mr Speaker in 2021 I will certainly look over my shoulder to acknowledge our historic past but make no mistake I will be staring hard at the future looking to build a modern dynamic economy.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for the Economy what support she is providing for the proposed maritime museum at Ebrington Square, Londonderry.
(AQO 898/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To date no financial support has been provided by my Department to the proposed DNA maritime Project.

Tourism Northern Ireland has engaged extensively with Derry City and Strabane District Council on the development of the Business Case for this Project and is content with how the Project sits within the wider tourism strategy for the Council area.

I understand that a meeting involving all potential funders, has been arranged for 27th October with the aim of agreeing how this strategically important project can be progressed into a funded project. Importantly, this meeting should also enable the Council to clarify whether it intends to bring forward the Project as part of its overall proposals under the Council's City Deal and Inclusive Future Fund.

Any potential funding from my Department would be provided through Tourism NI. I understand that Tourism NI has bid for a multi-annual, capital fund through the Comprehensive Spending Review to allow it to open a major projects funding programme. The outcome of that bid remains to be informed.

In line with standard procedures for all grant awards, any application to a scheme would have to pass eligibility and undergo a full appraisal and assessment process.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement she has had with Tourism Ireland on maximising the potential of the tourism recovery plan.
(AQO 899/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In May 2019 I established a Tourism Recovery Steering Group, which I chair, and a supporting Working Group, to help our hard pressed tourism and hospitality industry plan for recovery from COVID-19.

Niall Gibbons, Chief Executive of Tourism Ireland is represented on the Steering Group. Tourism Ireland is also represented on the Working Group. I have also met with Niall Gibbons on a number of occasions in recent months to discuss COVID recovery planning, including meeting with stakeholders from important markets, such as Great Britain and the United States.

Tourism Ireland has contributed to the development of a draft Tourism Recovery Action Plan. Tourism Ireland information which has helped to inform the draft Plan has included an extensive programme of COVID-19 research undertaken by Tourism Ireland to identify when consumers in key markets might consider holidaying again on the island of Ireland. This work includes identifying which markets offer the best short-term prospects.

The recovery of air and sea access is vitally important to our economy and my Department is working with Tourism Ireland to maximise the tourism potential of inbound routes.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy how much funding has been drawn down from Horizon 2020 by institutions and organisations .

(AQO 900/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As of August 2020, Horizon 2020 applications from Northern Ireland researchers have been approved for funding to the value of £95.5m, subject to final contracts.

Applications may be submitted to the Programme until the end of 2020. Given that the process of agreeing contracts can take many months, it is unlikely that we will know Northern Ireland's final drawdown amount from Horizon 2020 until late 2022.

Horizon 2020 success has been supported by the £3.4 million investment my Department has made to fund university-based Horizon 2020 Northern Ireland Contact Points. These are experienced individuals in key thematic areas, who assist potential Northern Ireland applicants to compete for funding.

My Department has prepared a business case to extend funding for these Contact Point posts until the end of 2021 to allow time to gain greater clarity on the future funding landscape for international research. Going forward, it will be important to give consideration to how best we support the NI research community in maximising future international research opportunities.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on discussions she has had with the UK Government on ensuring unfettered access for trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland after 31 December 2020.

(AQO 901/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is a top priority for me to ensure that Northern Ireland businesses continue to have unfettered access to our most important market in Great Britain.

I have been engaging with manufacturers across all sectors of the NI economy, who have been making clear that they expect there to be no barriers to their goods accessing, and remaining competitive within, the GB market.

Delivering unfettered access is a reserved matter and is therefore the responsibility of the UK Government. I expect the UK Government to honour its commitments to maintaining NI's place as an integral part of the UK internal market.

I have met with a range of UK Government Ministers to press these points on behalf of our businesses, including Secretaries of State and Ministers from BEIS, NIO, Cabinet Office and Defra.

I will continue with these engagements and intend to closely scrutinise forthcoming legislation on this matter to ensure it delivers on the commitments that have been made and most importantly that it meets the needs of our businesses.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the scope for a new approach to work culture when it comes to issues like working from home and flexible working.

(AQO 902/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There is no doubt that the outbreak of COVID-19 has had an immediate and significant impact on our approach to work. For many, working from home has become the norm for now and the current situation leaves us little choice - but also an opportunity - to review our work culture.

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 more time has passed and we have further evidence of the impact of these changes, can decisions be made for the longer term.

We should remember that, for some, working from home is not an option. Therefore any future decisions that we do make as a society, as employers and as individuals, must take into account the diversity of the job market and the needs of our economy.

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 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.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the total amount allocated to businesses in the Strangford constituency from grant schemes operated by her Department to help address the financial impact of COVID-19.
(AQO 903/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Businesses in the Strangford constituency received £15.923 million of financial support through the business support schemes introduced by my Department.

For the £10k Small Business grant, a total of £12.02million of Small Businesses grants have been made to businesses in the Strangford Parliamentary Constituency.

For the £25,000 Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant, 117 payments were made totalling £2.875 million of support. Of these payments, five had a value of £15,000 as the business had already received a £10,000 grant.

Finally, the Microbusiness Hardship Fund has, to date, paid out £1.028 million to 190 businesses in the Strangford Constituency.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the new capital builds for the Northern Regional College.
(AQO 904/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The advent of Covid-19 has significantly changed the landscape around the award of complex construction contracts. Northern Regional College's Project Board has taken the necessary time to fully understand and address the financial, contractual and delivery impacts of the pandemic, to inform decision making at this difficult time. While there are some issues still to be fully resolved, I understand these matters are progressing well. I hope to be in a position to confirm next steps regarding both the award of the construction contract for the Coleraine campus and the initiation of the tender process for the Ballymena campus by the end of October. I can confirm that delivery of these exciting further education campus projects remains a priority for my department given the hugely beneficial impacts the investment will bring to college students and staff and to the local economies in the Coleraine and Ballymena areas.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will refund students' fees if they do not have access to the full university experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
(AQO 905/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department is responsible for determining the annual maximum tuition fee level that can be charged by higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, it is a decision for the higher education institutions to determine what tuition fee levels they wish to charge Northern Ireland and EU domiciled students, up to that maximum level. This includes any decision regarding whether a student should receive a refund of this fee. I therefore do not have a remit to intervene in these matters,

However, the higher education institutions have assured me that they are committed to ensuring high academic standards, excellent teaching and learning provision, and a high quality student experience.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on potential COVID-19 support schemes for self-employed and sole traders that were ineligible for previously announced schemes.
(AQO 906/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The pandemic has had a devastating impact on our economy. The Executive and UK Government's support throughout the response phase of the crisis has been extensive, but I am aware that some businesses and individuals continue to face hardship as a result of the crisis.

Whilst the Executive has been focused on putting in place an economic recovery package, there has recently been a concerning rise in the number of people with confirmed positive cases of the virus. The Executive has therefore introduced further measures including wider restrictions across Northern Ireland and an enhanced localised lockdown restriction for the Derry City and Strabane District Council. There may also be further additional localised restrictions or wider interventions required.

My Executive Colleagues and I recognise that these restrictions will have an adverse impact on businesses and the local economy and a support package will be developed to support those impacted.

It is important that this package, and any further support measures, are considered within the ever changing context we are operating in. Any measures for further support would require collective agreement by the Executive.

I can assure members that I will do all I can to support my Executive Colleagues as we navigate the challenging times ahead and work towards economic recovery and the rebuilding of our economy.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans for a student lockdown, which would see students kept in university accommodation.
(AQW 8643/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As you will be aware, on 14 October 2020 the Executive announced a range of significant time-bound interventions to curb the spread of Covid-19 in Northern Ireland. This included advising that universities should deliver

distance learning to the maximum extent possible, with only essential face-to-face learning where that is a necessary and unavoidable part of the course.

While my Department is responsible for funding universities for teaching and research, I have no remit to instruct a student lockdown. The spread of Covid-19 is a public health issue, and I therefore expect the universities to follow all public health guidance, including that which may be developed to inform the Executive's most recent announcement.

All of our HE institutions have confirmed with my Department that the health, safety and wellbeing of their staff and students is their first priority.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to the Northern Ireland Audit Office report findings, to detail why the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme were set higher than payments in the United Kingdom.

(AQW 8716/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Renewable electricity generators do not receive payments through the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). Accredited generators receive Renewable Obligations Certificates (ROCs) for the electricity they generate, which they sell to electricity suppliers in a UK-wide market.

The vast majority of renewable electricity generation supported by the NIRO relates to large-scale onshore wind (approximately 75%) and the level of support for this technology has consistently been the same across the United Kingdom. The factually correct position is that the large majority of support provided by the NIRO is the same across the UK.

The NIAO report focuses on a subset of small-scale technologies. Since 2010, small-scale technologies in Great Britain have been supported by a Feed-in Tariff. This scheme operates differently to the Renewables Obligations and has provided wide ranging levels of support throughout its lifetime.

The NIAO findings relate to a limited period of time when support levels for these small-scale technologies in Northern Ireland were estimated to be higher than in the rest of the United Kingdom. The report accepts that there have also been periods when support for these technologies has been lower or similar in Northern Ireland.

All decisions relating to support levels applied in Northern Ireland were informed by public consultation, scrutinised by the Enterprise, Trade & Investment Committee, and debated in the Assembly where the legislation was subsequently passed.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Carroll asked the Assembly Commission whether it has considered making covered bike shelters available in and around Parliament Buildings.

(AQW 8061/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): I can confirm that there is a covered bike shelter, with 12 racks, located in the Lower East car park at Parliament Buildings. In addition, there is an uncovered bike stand in the Upper East car park with 10 racks.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 September 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

- 2.1 The Speaker indicated to Members that as the Statement relating to the first item of business was not received within the timeframe detailed in Standing Orders, he would suspend the sitting for a short period to allow Members to peruse the statement.

The sitting was suspended at 12.02pm.

The sitting resumed at 12.12pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

- 2.2 The Speaker made Members aware that the First Minister would respond to oral questions on behalf of the Executive Office as the deputy First Minister was unwell and unavailable to attend.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement – Legislative Error Resulting in Invalid Convictions for Sexual Offences

The Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, made a statement to the Assembly regarding a Legislative Error Resulting in Invalid Convictions for Sexual Offences, following which she replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

3.2 Statement – Public Expenditure: 2020-21 Covid-19 Economic Recovery Assessment

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, made a statement to the Assembly regarding Public Expenditure: 2020-21 Covid-19 Economic Recovery Assessment, following which he replied to questions.

The sitting was suspended at 1.54pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in 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 Declan Kearney, also answered a number of questions.

4.2 Communities

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Communities, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

5.1 Legislative Consent Motion: The Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly agrees, in line with Section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill dealing with social security co-ordination as contained in the Bill which was introduced in the House of Commons on 5 March 2020.

Minister for Communities

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

6. Private Members' Business

6.1 Motion: Children with Hearing Difficulties and Deafness

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of early detection, intervention and support for children with hearing difficulties and deafness; acknowledges the negative impact that delay can have on their future educational attainment; and calls on the Minister of Health to take immediate steps to identify and address urgently the backlog of postponed audio appointments and cancelled cochlear implant procedures that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Ms Catherine Kelly

Mr Colm Gildernew

Ms Órlaithí Flynn

Mr Pat Sheehan

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6.2 Motion: Introduction of Legislation Equivalent to Helen's Law

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the ongoing pain and trauma experienced by families in Northern Ireland whose loved ones have been murdered and who continue to have no knowledge of the whereabouts of their remains; welcomes the progression in the UK Houses of Parliament of the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill, otherwise known as Helen's Law, placing a statutory obligation on the Parole Board to take into account an offender's non-disclosure of such information when making a decision about their release from prison; notes that these obligations apply to prisoners serving a sentence for murder or manslaughter, or for taking or making an indecent photograph of a child; and calls on the Minister of Justice to introduce urgently equivalent legislation in Northern Ireland to ensure that prisoners convicted of murder and child sex offences are not eligible for release until they disclose the location of their victims' remains or the identity of their victims.

Mr Alex Easton

Mr Paul Givan

Amendment**Proposed:**

Leave out all after the first 'child' and insert:

'acknowledges that such matters are already routinely considered by the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland when assessing prisoners' suitability for release on licence; and further welcomes that the Minister of Justice has already commissioned a focused consultation with key stakeholders on Helen's Law, to run in parallel with finalising the outcome and next steps flowing from the Sentencing Review, including legislation where appropriate.

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Paula Bradshaw

Debate ensued

The Question being put, the Amendment was **negatived**.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.42pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

28 September 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 23 September 2020 to 28 September 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
Northern Ireland Audit Office Annual Report and Accounts 2019-2020 (Northern Ireland Audit Office)
5. Assembly Reports
Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Fourth Report of Session 2020 - 2021 (NIA 44/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules
SR 2020/201 The Rates (Coronavirus) (Electronic Communications) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/202 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/203 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 12) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/204 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
Public Expenditure, 2021 COVID-19 Allocations (Minister of Finance)

COVID-19 Update (Minister of Health)

Outcome from the Recent Competition to Appoint a New Head of the Civil Service (First Minister and deputy First Minister)
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 28 September 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 28 September 2020:

Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
Kellie Armstrong	Gordon Lyons
Cathal Boylan	Séan Lynch
Sinéad Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Jonathan Buckley	Declan McAleer
Pam Cameron	Fra McCann
Pat Catney	Daniel McCrossan
Stewart Dickson	Patsy McGlone
Linda Dillon	Colin McGrath
Diane Dodds	Philip McGuigan
Jemma Dolan	Maoliosa McHugh
Gordon Dunne	Sinead McLaughlin
Mark Durkan	Justin McNulty
Sinéad Ennis	Andrew Muir
Arlene Foster	Karen Mullan
Órlaithí Flynn	Conor Murphy
Colm Gildernew	Robin Newton
Paul Givan	Carál Ní Chuilín
Deirdre Hargey	Michelle O'Neill
Harry Harvey	Edwin Poots
David Hilditch	George Robinson
Cara Hunter	Emma Rogan
William Irwin	Pat Sheehan
Declan Kearney	Emma Sheerin
Catherine Kelly	Christopher Stalford
Dolores Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 29 September 2020

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 - COVID-19 Restrictions on the Hospitality Industry

The First Minister, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster, made a statement to the Assembly regarding COVID-19 Restrictions on the Hospitality Industry, following which she replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

2.2 Motion: The Northern Ireland Screen Commission (Funding) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Northern Ireland Screen Commission (Funding) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Minister for the Economy

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

2.3 Legislative Consent Motion: Fisheries Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Fisheries Bill, as introduced in the House of Lords on 29 January 2020, and consents to the Fisheries Bill being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.59pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Economy

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds.

3.2 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

The Speaker took the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

4.1 Legislative Consent Motion: Fisheries Bill (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

5. Committee Business

5.1 Motion: Amend Standing Order 110

Proposed:

Leave out Standing Order 110(1) and insert-

(1) Unless the Assembly previously resolves, Standing Orders 110-116 ('the temporary provisions') apply in the period from 31st March 2020 – 31st January 2021.

Chairperson, Committee on Procedures

Debate ensued

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Mrs Dolores Kelly spoke to her topic regarding the School Estate in Upper Bann.

The Assembly adjourned at 5.40pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

29 September 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 29 September 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Impact Review of Special Educational Needs (Northern Ireland Audit Office)
 - Public Income and Expenditure Account for year ended 31 March 2020 (Department of Finance)
 - CJI Inspection of Police Custody Arrangements in Northern Ireland (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
 - 2020/205 The Motorways Traffic (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)
 - SR 2020/206 The Coolshinney Park, Magherafelt (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)
 - SR 2020/207 The Llewellyn Drive, Lisburn (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)
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 29 September 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20					
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA 5/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA 6/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA 7/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	29/01/21					
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA 8/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20

2017-2022 Mandate**Non-Executive Bills**

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17- 22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 29 September 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 29 September 2020:

Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Kellie Armstrong	Naomi Long
Roy Beggs*	Gordon Lyons
Cathal Boylan	Séan Lynch
Sinéad Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradshaw	Declan McAleer
Jonathan Buckley	Fra McCann
Pam Cameron	Daniel McCrossan
Pat Catney	Patsy McGlone
Stewart Dickson	Colin McGrath
Linda Dillon	Philip McGuigan
Diane Dodds	Maolíosa McHugh
Jemma Dolan	Sinead McLaughlin
Gordon Dunne	Justin McNulty
Mark Durkan	Andrew Muir
Sinéad Ennis	Karen Mullan
Arlene Foster	Conor Murphy
Órlaithí Flynn	Robin Newton
Colm Gildernew	Carál Ní Chuilín
Paul Givan	Michelle O'Neill
Deirdre Hargey	Edwin Poots
Harry Harvey	George Robinson
David Hilditch	Emma Rogan
Cara Hunter	Pat Sheehan
William Irwin	Emma Sheerin
Declan Kearney	Christopher Stalford
Catherine Kelly	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

* Roy Beggs indicated that his proxy was in place after 3:00pm on 29 September 2020.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 5 October 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Matter of the Day

Death of Derek Mahon

Mr Matthew O'Toole, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the Death of Derek Mahon. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Philip McGuigan replace Mr Seán Lynch as a member of the Committee for Finance; that Ms Emma Rogan replace Ms Emma Sheerin as a member of the Audit Committee; and that Mr Seán Lynch replace Mr Colm Gildernew as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr John O'Dowd

Ms Sinéad Ennis

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Motion: The Pension Protection Fund (Moratorium and Arrangements for Companies in Financial Difficulty) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Pension Protection Fund (Moratorium and Arrangements for Companies in Financial Difficulty) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister for Communities

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion: Appointment of a Victims of Crime Commissioner

Proposed:

That this Assembly agrees that all victims of crime deserve to receive the same support following a criminal offence being perpetrated against them and during any judicial proceedings; and calls on the Minister of Justice to conduct a feasibility study into the appointment of a Victims of Crime Commissioner who would act as a focal point, champion and advocate and bring forward best practice in dealing with, and supporting, victims of crime.

*Mr Doug Beattie
Mr Robbie Butler*

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

5.2 Motion: Consequences of the British Government Breaking International Law

Proposed:

That this Assembly is appalled that the British Government has abandoned any pretence of adherence to international law; recognises that the potential for a Trade Agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom has significantly diminished as a result of the British Government reneging on key elements of the Withdrawal Agreement; acknowledges that this would be devastating for workers and families with inevitable business failures, job losses and economic damage; and calls on the British Government to respect the rule of law and honour its obligations in full as set out in the Withdrawal Agreement which it negotiated and which the British Parliament agreed.

*Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Mr John O'Dowd
Ms Martina Anderson
Ms Emma Sheerin*

Debate ensued.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

6.2 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

The Speaker took the Chair.

7. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

7.1 Support for Businesses in the North West

The Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Gary Middleton.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

8. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

8.1 Motion: Consequences of the British Government Breaking International Law (cont'd)

Debate resumed

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** (Division).

9. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.30pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

5 October 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

5 October 2020

Division

Motion: Consequences of the British Government Breaking International Law

Proposed:

That this Assembly is appalled that the British Government has abandoned any pretence of adherence to international law; recognises that the potential for a Trade Agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom has significantly diminished as a result of the British Government renegeing on key elements of the Withdrawal Agreement; acknowledges that this would be devastating for workers and families with inevitable business failures, job losses and economic damage; and calls on the British Government to respect the rule of law and honour its obligations in full as set out in the Withdrawal Agreement which it negotiated and which the British Parliament agreed.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Mr John O'Dowd
Ms Martina Anderson
Ms Emma Sheerin

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 46

Noes: 38

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, 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 Anderson, Dr Archibald.

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 Middleton, Mr Storey.

The motion was **carried**.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

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

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

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 30 September 2020 to 5 October 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Disposal of Documents Order 1925 – Renewable Heating Incentive Inquiry (RHI) Retention and Disposal Schedule (Department for Communities)

Department of Health Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2020 (Department of Finance)

2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts for the NI Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR) (Department of Finance)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Fifth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 45/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/208 The Planning (Development Management) (Temporary Modifications) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/209 The Business Tenancies (Coronavirus) (Restriction on Forfeiture: Relevant Period) (Northern Ireland) (No 2) Regulations 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/210 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/211 The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period for Meetings of Registered Societies and Credit Unions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2020/212 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 13) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

For information only

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2020/204 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/117 The Northern Ireland Screen Commission (Funding) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

COVID-19 Restrictions in the North West (The Executive Office)

COVID-19 Update (Minister of Health)

£1.7m Further COVID-19 Support for the Sea Fish Catching Sector (Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.13) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020
(Department of Education)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 5 October 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 5 October 2020:

Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
Kellie Armstrong	Gordon Lyons
John Blair	Séan Lynch
Cathal Boylan	Chris Lyttle
Sinéad Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Jonathan Buckley	Fra McCann
Pam Cameron	Daniel McCrossan
Pat Catney	Patsy McGlone
Stewart Dickson	Colin McGrath
Linda Dillon	Philip McGuigan
Diane Dodds	Maoliosa McHugh
Jemma Dolan	Sinead McLaughlin
Gordon Dunne	Justin McNulty
Mark Durkan	Andrew Muir
Sinéad Ennis	Karen Mullan
Arlene Foster	Conor Murphy
Órlaithí Flynn	Robin Newton
Colm Gildernew	Carál Ní Chuilín
Paul Givan	Michelle O'Neill
Deirdre Hargey	Edwin Poots
Harry Harvey	George Robinson
David Hilditch	Emma Rogan
Cara Hunter	Pat Sheehan
William Irwin	Emma Sheerin
Declan Kearney	Christopher Stalford
Catherine Kelly	John Stewart
Dolores Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 6 October 2020

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 – Upcoming Spending Review and Fiscal Flexibilities

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, made a statement to the Assembly regarding Upcoming Spending Review and Fiscal Flexibilities, following which he replied to questions.

2.2 Statement – Surge Planning Strategic Framework

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, made a statement to the Assembly regarding a Surge Planning Strategic Framework, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

The Speaker took the Chair.

2.3 Statement – Appointment of the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse

The deputy First Minister, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a statement to the Assembly regarding the Appointment of the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse, following which she replied to questions.

The sitting was suspended at 12.53pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

3.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

4.1 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion: Impact of COVID-19 Restrictions on Workers and on the Economy

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the profound impact of COVID-19 restrictions on workers and the economy; notes projections that more than 100,000 people in Northern Ireland could be unemployed by the end of 2020; further notes with regret that many businesses are excluded from current support schemes; notes the positive impact of wage subsidy programmes as a critical lifeline to small businesses and those struggling to make ends meet; expresses regret that the Minister for the Economy has not produced a COVID-19 recovery strategy that provides support to workers and businesses asked to restrict their trading capacity; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Minister of Finance to bring forward a radical economic intervention programme that supports wages, creates pathways for those who have lost their jobs to re-enter the labour market, promotes new jobs and closes regional imbalances.

Ms Sinead McLaughlin

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Pat Catney

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Speaker took the Chair.

5.2 Motion: Terminal Illness

Proposed:

That this Assembly welcomes the recommendation, in the Walter Rader Independent Review of the Personal Independence Payment Assessment Process in Northern Ireland, that the six-month life expectancy criteria be removed from the terminal illness rule; notes the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Terminal Illness inquiry; recognises that there is significant evidence and support for reforming the six-month rule in all relevant welfare benefits among a wide range of local stakeholders; further welcomes the recent establishment of an Assembly All Party Group on Terminal Illness; and calls on the Minister for Communities to bring forward immediately legislation to remove the six-month rule, provide guidance to health professionals and adopt a fairer definition of terminal illness.

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Paula Bradshaw

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Mr Doug Beattie spoke to his topic regarding Protecting the Knock Iveagh Historical and Archaeological Site.

The Assembly adjourned at 8.17pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

6 October 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 6 October 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
Annual Report and Accounts for 2019-20 of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland (Department of Health)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
SR 2020/213 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

For information only

SR 2020/162 The Pension Protection Fund (Moratorium and Arrangements for Companies in Financial Difficulty) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 6 October 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20					
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA 5/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA 6/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA 7/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	29/01/21					
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA 8/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20

2017-2022 Mandate**Non-Executive Bills**

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17- 22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 6 October 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 6 October 2020:

Andy Allen	Gerry Kelly
Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
Kellie Armstrong	Gordon Lyons
Roy Beggs*	Séan Lynch
John Blair	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Sinéad Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Jonathan Buckley	Daniel McCrossan
Pam Cameron	Patsy McGlone
Pat Catney	Colin McGrath
Stewart Dickson	Philip McGuigan
Linda Dillon	Maolíosa McHugh
Diane Dodds	Sinead McLaughlin
Jemma Dolan	Justin McNulty
Gordon Dunne	Andrew Muir
Mark Durkan	Karen Mullan
Alex Easton	Conor Murphy
Arlene Foster	Robin Newton
Órlaithí Flynn	Carál Ní Chuilín
Colm Gildernew	John O'Dowd
Paul Givan	Michelle O'Neill
Deirdre Hargey	Edwin Poots
Harry Harvey	George Robinson
David Hilditch	Emma Rogan
Cara Hunter	Pat Sheehan
William Irwin	Emma Sheerin
Declan Kearney	Christopher Stalford
Catherine Kelly	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

* Roy Beggs indicated that his proxy was in place after 7:00pm on 6 October 2020.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 12 October 2020

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

Proposed:

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

Minister for the Economy

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

2.2 **Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Health

Debate ensued.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 **Economy**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds.

3.2 **Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots.

4. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

4.1 **Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments Proposals**

The Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Ms Karen Mullan.

5. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

5.1 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

6. Private Members' Business

6.1 Motion: Increasing the Number of Police Officers in Northern Ireland

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of effective, responsive and visible policing across Northern Ireland; highlights that better-resourced neighbourhood and local policing teams stand to improve outcomes in addressing traditional and emerging crime threats, preventing harm, and promoting grassroots support for law and order; stresses, moreover, the critical need to ensure the Police Service of Northern Ireland is appropriately resourced to deal with the enduring threat of terrorism and paramilitary activity; welcomes, to this end, the Executive commitment contained in New Decade, New Approach to increase police officer numbers to 7,500; expresses deep concern with the lack of progress and inaction to date; and calls on the Minister of Justice to work proactively with the Minister of Finance to honour and implement the commitment to enhanced local police numbers by the end of this Assembly mandate.

Mr Mervyn Storey

Mr Thomas Buchanan

Mr Trevor Clarke

Ms Joanne Bunting

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after the first 'concern' and insert:

'that the costs of delivering the full range of priorities set out in New Decade, New Approach are far in excess of the funding package provided by the British Government; and calls on the British Government to provide adequate funding to take forward the New Decade, New Approach priorities which will enable the Executive to honour and implement the commitment to enhanced local police numbers by the end of this Assembly mandate.'

Mr Gerry Kelly

Ms Linda Dillon

Mr Seán Lynch

Ms Liz Kimmins

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** (Division 1).

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried**.

The Speaker took the Chair.

7. Assembly Business

7.1 Motion: Extension of Sitting on Monday 12 October 2020 under Standing Order 10(3A)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 12 October 2020 be extended to no later than 9.00pm.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

8. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

8.1 Motion: The European Union-United Kingdom Withdrawal Agreement

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the British Government's stated intention, in breach of international law, to renege on elements of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement; urges the European Council to stand by, fully, the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement as agreed; and calls on the European Council to require the British Government to implement fully the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

Mr John O'Dowd

Ms Emma Sheerin

Mr Declan McAleer

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Amendment:

Proposed:

At end insert:

'; and further calls on the UK Government and the European Union to work constructively within the context of the Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland to put in place any waivers, mitigations and flexibilities necessary to make its implementation as light touch as possible.'

Mr Stewart Dickson

Mr Andrew Muir

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** (Division 2).

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried**.

9. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.13pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

12 October 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

12 October 2020

Division 1

Motion: Increasing the Number of Police Officers in Northern Ireland - Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after the first 'concern' and insert:

'that the costs of delivering the full range of priorities set out in New Decade, New Approach are far in excess of the funding package provided by the British Government; and calls on the British Government to provide adequate funding to take forward the New Decade, New Approach priorities which will enable the Executive to honour and implement the commitment to enhanced local police numbers by the end of this Assembly mandate.'

*Mr Gerry Kelly
Ms Linda Dillon
Mr Seán Lynch
Ms Liz Kimmins*

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 47

Noes: 36

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr 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 Kimmins

NOES

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 Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke, Mr Nesbitt

The Amendment was **made**.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

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

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

Northern Ireland Assembly

12 October 2020

Division 2

Motion as amended: The European Union-United Kingdom Withdrawal Agreement

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the British Government's stated intention, in breach of international law, to renege on elements of the EU/UK withdrawal agreement; urges the European Council to stand by, fully, the EU/UK withdrawal agreement as agreed; and calls on the European Council to require the British Government to implement fully the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and further calls on the UK Government and the European Union to work constructively within the context of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to put in place any waivers, mitigations and flexibilities necessary to make its implementation as light touch as possible.

*Mr John O'Dowd
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Declan McAleer
Dr Caoimhe Archibald*

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 45

Noes: 33

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr 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.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McAleer, Ms Sheerin

NOES

Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, 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 Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buckley, Mr Givan

The motion, as amended, was **made**.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr Buckley [Teller, Noes], Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan [Teller, Noes], Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Swann.

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

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, Mr McNulty.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 7 October 2020 to 12 October 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

British Library Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (British Library)

HSC Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

NIAO Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

5. Assembly Reports

Major Capital Projects (NIA 46/17-22) (Public Accounts Committee)

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Sixth Report of Session 2020 - 2021 (NIA 47/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/214 The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Schedule 8) (Early Termination of Certain Temporary Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2020/215 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Public Health Advice for Persons Travelling to Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/216 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 14) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/217 The Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

For information only

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2020/210 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2020/212 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 13) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

COVID-19 Update (Minister of Health)

8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 12 October 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 12 October 2020:

Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Kellie Armstrong	Naomi Long
John Blair	Gordon Lyons
Cathal Boylan	Séan Lynch
Sinéad Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Jonathan Buckley	Declan McAleer
Pam Cameron	Fra McCann
Pat Catney	Daniel McCrossan
Stewart Dickson	Patsy McGlone
Linda Dillon	Colin McGrath
Diane Dodds	Philip McGuigan
Jemma Dolan	Maoliosa McHugh
Gordon Dunne	Sinead McLaughlin
Mark Durkan	Justin McNulty
Alex Easton	Andrew Muir
Sinéad Ennis	Karen Mullan
Arlene Foster	Conor Murphy
Órlaithí Flynn	Robin Newton
Colm Gildernew	Carál Ní Chuilín
Paul Givan	Michelle O'Neill
Deirdre Hargey	Edwin Poots
Harry Harvey	George Robinson
David Hilditch	Emma Rogan
Cara Hunter	Pat Sheehan
William Irwin	Emma Sheerin
Declan Kearney	Christopher Stalford
Catherine Kelly	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 13 October 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

- 2.1 Prior to taking the first item of business, the Suspension of Standing Order 20(1), the Speaker explained that the motion was necessary to allow business to continue at 2.00 pm in the absence of questions to the Minister for Communities. The Speaker also put on record that he was disappointed that no other Executive Minister was able to stand in for the Minister for Communities to respond to questions on her behalf, and highlighted the arrangements put in place to ensure that those Members successful in the ballot would still have the opportunity to put their question to the Minister.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion: Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for Tuesday 13 October 2020.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

3.2 Motion: Referral to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee

Proposed:

That this Assembly refers to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee under Standing Order 59(3)(b) the matter of the commissioning of an independent review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the Statement of Entitlements for an Official Opposition, as set out in paragraph 3.7 of Annex C of the New Decade, New Approach Deal; agrees that the terms of reference for this review should be agreed jointly by this Committee and the Assembly Commission; and further agrees that the Committee should report on the outcome of this review to the Assembly.

Mr John Blair

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr Robbie Butler

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr John O'Dowd

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** without division.

4. Committee Business

4.1 Motion: Amend Standing Order 45A

Proposed:

Leave out Standing Order 45A and insert –

“(1) Subject to paragraph (3), where, at a time when all Northern Ireland Ministers

ceased to hold office, a party is entitled to nominate a person to hold Ministerial

office under section 18(2) to (6) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and declines to do so, that party may choose to be recognised as part of the official opposition.

(2) Subject to paragraph (3), where, during the relevant period, a party is entitled

to nominate a person to hold a Ministerial office under section 18(10) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and declines to do so, that party may choose to be recognised as part of the official opposition.

(3) A party is not to be recognised as part of the official opposition if any member of that party holds a Ministerial office.

(4) Where only one party chooses to be recognised in accordance with paragraph (1) or paragraph (2) that party is to be regarded as the official opposition.

(5) In this order “relevant period” means the period of two years beginning with the date on which the Ministerial offices are filled under 16A(3)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”.

Chairperson, Committee on Procedures

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** with cross-community support (Division).

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5. Private Members’ Business

5.1 Motion: Support for the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill [HL] 2019-21

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes Anti-Slavery Day 2020 which seeks to raise awareness of human trafficking today; condemns the crime of human trafficking which tragically happens in our society; welcomes the progress Northern Ireland has made, with the passage of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, and the work of the Department of Justice, statutory agencies, the PSNI and civil society organisations; calls for consideration of further support for victims of trafficking beyond the end of the support provided under the National Referral Mechanism; and calls on the UK Parliament to pass the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill [HL] 2019-21 which would give confirmed victims of trafficking who find themselves in Northern Ireland, leave to remain for twelve months following the National Referral Mechanism so that they can receive the support they need to recover from their ordeal, and to make it possible for them to think about giving evidence against their traffickers in court, something that is essential to reverse the low conviction rates for traffickers.

Ms Joanne Bunting

Mr Gordon Dunne

Mr Paul Givan

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The sitting was suspended at 1.06pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

6. Public Petition

6.1 Restoration of Emergency Department at Downe Hospital

Mr Colin McGrath was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition relating to the Restoration of Emergency Department at Downe Hospital.

7. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

7.1 Motion: Onshore Petroleum Licencing and Drilling

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the moratoria, in various forms, on fracking in England, Scotland and Wales and the ban on fracking in the Republic of Ireland; notes that this motion builds on the 2015 Strategic Planning Policy Statement presumption against the exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbon extraction in Northern Ireland; acknowledges its responsibility to protect public health and the environment; and calls on the Executive to instigate an immediate moratorium on petroleum licencing for all exploration for, drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbons until legislation is brought forward that bans all exploration for, drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbons in Northern Ireland.

*Ms Rachel Woods
Mr Philip McGuigan
Ms Claire Sugden
Mr Jim Wells*

Debate ensued.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

8. Question Time

8.1 The Executive Office

Questions were put to, and answered by, the First Minister, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster, Mr Gordon Lyons, also answered a number of questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

9. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

9.1 Motion: Onshore Petroleum Licencing and Drilling (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

10. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Mr Thomas Buchanan spoke to his topic regarding the Acute Mental Health facility at Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex.

The Assembly adjourned at 4.45pm.

Mr Alex Maskey
The Speaker

13 October 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

13 October 2020

Division

Motion: Amend Standing Order 45A

Proposed:

Leave out Standing Order 45A and insert –

“(1) Subject to paragraph (3), where, at a time when all Northern Ireland Ministers ceased to hold office, a party is entitled to nominate a person to hold Ministerial office under section 18(2) to (6) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and declines to do so, that party may choose to be recognised as part of the official opposition.

(2) Subject to paragraph (3), where, during the relevant period, a party is entitled to nominate a person to hold a Ministerial office under section 18(10) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and declines to do so, that party may choose to be recognised as part of the official opposition.

(3) A party is not to be recognised as part of the official opposition if any member of that party holds a Ministerial office.

(4) Where only one party chooses to be recognised in accordance with paragraph (1) or paragraph (2) that party is to be regarded as the official opposition.

(5) In this order “relevant period” means the period of two years beginning with the date on which the Ministerial offices are filled under 16A(3)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”.

Chairperson, Committee on Procedures

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 80

Noes: 5

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin

Unionist

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr 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: Mr T Buchanan, Mr Harvey

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	38	Nationalist Ayes	38 [100.0%]
Unionist Votes	37	Unionist Ayes	35 [94.6%]
Other Votes	10	Other Ayes	7 [70.0%]

The motion was **carried**.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey [Teller, Ayes], Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Weir and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

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

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, Mr McNulty.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 13 October 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Main Estimates 2020-21 and Statement of Excesses 2016-17 (Department of Finance)
 - Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 for the General Teaching Council for NI (Department of Education)
 - 2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts for the Department of Education (Department of Finance)
 - CJI An Inspection of How The Criminal Justice System Deals With Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking in Northern Ireland (Department of Justice)
 - Northern Ireland Policing Board Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Northern Ireland Policing Board)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
 - SR 2020/218 The Planning Act 2011 (Review) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
 - Consultation on Draft Gas (Internal Markets) Regulations (Department for the Economy)
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 13 October 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20					
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA 5/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA 6/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA 7/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	29/01/21					
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA 8/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20

2017-2022 Mandate**Non-Executive Bills**

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17- 22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 13 October 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 13 October 2020:

Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Kellie Armstrong	Séan Lynch
John Blair	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Sinéad Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Jonathan Buckley	Daniel McCrossan
Pam Cameron	Patsy McGlone
Pat Catney	Colin McGrath
Stewart Dickson	Philip McGuigan
Linda Dillon	Maolíosa McHugh
Diane Dodds	Sinead McLaughlin
Jemma Dolan	Justin McNulty
Gordon Dunne	Andrew Muir
Mark Durkan	Karen Mullan
Alex Easton	Conor Murphy
Sinéad Ennis	Robin Newton
Arlene Foster	Carál Ní Chuilín
Órlaithí Flynn	Michelle O'Neill
Colm Gildernew	Edwin Poots
Paul Givan	George Robinson
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Rogan
Harry Harvey	Pat Sheehan
David Hilditch	Emma Sheerin
Cara Hunter	Christopher Stalford
William Irwin	John Stewart
Declan Kearney	Mervyn Storey
Catherine Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir
Liz Kimmins	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Wednesday 14 October 2020

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: The Executive's decisions relating to measures to be taken in response to the increased incidence of the transmission of Covid-19**

The First Minister, the Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, made a statement regarding the Executive's decisions relating to measures to be taken in response to the increased incidence of the transmission of Covid-19, following which she replied to questions.

3. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 11.43am.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

14 October 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 14 October 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
Northern Ireland Environment Agency's Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
SR 220/219 The Ornamental Horticulture Industry (Coronavirus, Financial Assistance) Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/220 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/221 The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Wednesday 14 October 2020

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Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
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Stewart Dickson	Philip McGuigan
Linda Dillon	Maolíosa McHugh
Diane Dodds	Sinead McLaughlin
Jemma Dolan	Justin McNulty
Gordon Dunne	Andrew Muir
Mark Durkan	Karen Mullan
Alex Easton	Conor Murphy
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Arlene Foster	Carál Ní Chuilín
Órlaithí Flynn	Michelle O'Neill
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David Hilditch	Emma Sheerin
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William Irwin	John Stewart
Declan Kearney	Mervyn Storey
Catherine Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir
Liz Kimmins	

