



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 125

(11 January 2020 to 10 February 2020)

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Assembly Members

A

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle) (*from 10 February 2020*)
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)

B

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

C

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

D

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

E

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

F

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

G

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

H

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

I

Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)

K

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

L

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

M

McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle) (*until 3 February 2020*)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
McHugh, Maoliosa (West Tyrone)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McLaughlin, Ms Sinead (Foyle)
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (Speaker)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Muir, Andrew (North Down)
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)

N

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

O

O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast) (*from 11 January 2020*)

P

Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)

R

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

S

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

W

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

Principal Officers and Officials of the Assembly

Speaker	Mr Alex Maskey MLA
Principal Deputy Speaker	Mr Christopher Stalford MLA
Deputy Speakers	Mr Roy Beggs MLA Mr Patsy McGlone MLA
Clerk to the Assembly/Chief Executive	Mrs Lesley Hogg
Director of Corporate Services	Mr Richard Stewart
Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services	Ms Tara Caul
Director of Parliamentary Services	Dr Gareth McGrath
Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support	Mr Robin Ramsey
Clerk Assistants	Mr Paul Gill Mr Damien Martin (<i>until 31 January 2020</i>)
Editor of Debates and Head of Public Engagement	Mr Simon Burrowes
Examiner of Statutory Rules	Ms Angela Kelly

Ministerial Offices

The Executive Committee

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

Junior Ministers

The Executive Office	Mr Declan Kearney Mr Gordon Lyons
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Office of the Official Report (Hansard)

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Editor of Debates and Head of Public Engagement.....	Simon Burrowes
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Administration.....	Conor McCourt (<i>from 3 February 2020</i>)

Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Settings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Saturday 11 January 2020

The Assembly met at 1.00 pm

Assembly Business

The Acting Speaker (Mr Robinson): On the last occasion the Assembly met, it was unable to elect a Speaker. In accordance with Standing Order 4(8), I have taken the Chair as an acting Speaker until a Speaker is elected.

Before we commence, I wish to advise you that, since the Assembly's last sitting, on 21 October 2019, several Members have resigned or ceased to be Members of the Assembly under the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975.

In accordance with the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act, Mr Colum Eastwood, Dr Stephen Farry, Ms Claire Hanna and Ms Carla Lockhart ceased to be Members of the Assembly on 13 December 2019, and I notified the Chief Electoral Officer in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Sinead McLaughlin has been returned as a Member for Foyle, Andrew Muir as a Member for North Down, Matthew O'Toole as a Member for South Belfast and Mrs Diane Dodds as a Member for Upper Bann.

Mr Andrew Muir gave the undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered his designation in the presence of the Speaker and Clerk on 23 December 2019. Mrs Diane Dodds gave the undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered her designation in the presence of the Speaker and Clerk on 9 January 2020. Ms Sinead McLaughlin gave the undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered her designation in the presence of the Speaker and Clerk on 10 January 2020. The Members have now taken their seats.

I also advise Members that I have received letters from Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir and Ms Megan Fearon advising of their resignation as Members for the South Belfast and Newry and Armagh constituencies respectively, with effect from close of business on Monday 6 January 2020. I notified the Chief Electoral Officer in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

I was informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Deirdre Hargey has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for South Belfast and Ms Liz Kimmins has been returned as a Member for Newry and Armagh. Ms Deirdre Hargey and Ms Liz Kimmins signed the undertaking and Roll of Membership and entered their designations in the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive on 9 January 2020.

I have also received a letter of resignation from Máire Hendron advising of her resignation as a Member for East Belfast with effect from 12:00 midnight on 8 January. I notified the Chief Electoral Officer in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

I was informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mrs Naomi Long has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for East Belfast, and she signed the undertaking and Roll of Membership and entered her designation in the presence of the Speaker and the Chief Executive on 9 January 2020.

On behalf of the Assembly, I welcome the new Members and wish them every success.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Robinson): Before we can proceed, I want to make clear the procedural constraints on this sitting. Section 39(1) of the Northern Ireland Act provides that:

"Each Assembly shall as its first business elect from among its members a Presiding Officer and deputies."

Therefore, the Assembly cannot conduct any further business until a Speaker and Deputy Speakers have been elected. Members should be clear: if a Speaker and Deputy Speakers are not elected, no further business can proceed.

Election of the Speaker

The Acting Speaker (Mr Robinson): The first item of business is the election of the Speaker, and I will remain in the Chair for this process. I advise Members that the election of the Speaker will be conducted under the procedures set out in Standing Order 4.

I will begin by asking for nominations. Any Member may rise to propose that another Member is elected as Speaker. I will then ask for the proposal to be seconded by another Member, as required by Standing Order 14. Members who have been proposed will be asked whether they are willing to accept the nomination. If they are not, that proposal will fall. I will then ask for further proposals and follow the same procedure for each. When it appears that there are no further proposals, I will make it clear that the time for proposals has passed. If Members indicate that they wish to speak, a debate relevant to the election may then take place. Members will be allowed up to three minutes to speak.

At the conclusion of the debate or the conclusion of the nominations, if there are no requests to speak, I shall put the Question that the Member first proposed shall be Speaker of the Assembly. The vote will be on a cross-community basis. If the proposal is not carried, I shall put the Question in relation to the next nominee and so on, until all nominations are exhausted. Once a Speaker is elected, all other nominations will fall automatically.

Do I have any proposals for the office of Speaker of the Assembly?

Mrs O'Neill: A Cheann Comhairle, I nominate Alex Maskey for the position of Ceann Comhairle, Speaker of the House.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Robinson): Have we a seconder?

Mr Murphy: I second that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Robinson): Are there any other proposals?

Dr Aiken: I propose Roy Beggs MLA as Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr Swann: I second that.

Ms Mallon: I nominate Mr Patsy McGlone for the office of Speaker.

Mrs D Kelly: I second that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Robinson): Are there any other proposals?

I ask the people who have been nominated whether they accept the proposal.

Mr Maskey: Yes, I accept.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Robinson): Roy Beggs, do you accept the proposal?

Mr Beggs: I accept the proposal.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Robinson): Patsy McGlone, do you accept the proposal?

Mr McGlone: I accept the proposal.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Robinson): Are there any other proposals? No.

The time for proposals has expired. A number of Members have indicated that they wish to speak. I remind Members that they may speak only once in the course of the debate. Having consulted with the Whips, I will allow Members up to three minutes in which to speak and approximately 30 minutes for contributions. Members should note that, while it is entirely a matter for them if they wish to take interventions, on this occasion, I will not give extra time to those who do so.

Mr Weir: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker. First, I congratulate you on the conduct of today's sitting. It is great to see you in your rightful place, George.

The eyes of the world are on us today, but the citizens of Northern Ireland are particularly looking to us to deliver for them. They look on with hope and expectation and probably — some of them — with a certain level of cynicism, so there is a major challenge for all of us.

We begin today with this first item of business, the election of a Speaker, which is the first step in a long journey — one might say, "a never-ending journey" — to try to make life better for all our citizens.

In electing a new Speaker, we should first acknowledge and pay tribute to the outgoing Speaker, Robin Newton. When someone leaves a senior post such as this, it is, perhaps, the nearest equivalent that he will have to hearing the eulogies at his own funeral, without having the inconvenience of dying in the meantime. However, I have no hesitation in praising Robin Newton. I have known Robin and his family for more than 20 years. Above all, Robin is a family man. He is a man of quiet conviction and unlike, perhaps, some outgoing Speakers in other places, he did not seek to make himself the centre of attention in a showy role but tried to maintain discipline in a fair, even-handed and dignified manner. In doing so, I suppose, every Speaker, at times, will incur the wrath of one side or the other. They will have disagreed with different decisions, and, at times, I am sure, all of us have disagreed with something that the Speaker has done, but that highlights his impartiality. We wish him well in the future.

1.15 pm

As I said, we have a long journey ahead of us, on which it will be a challenge to all 90 of us in the Chamber to work together. Whether parties are in government or not in government, the betterment of the people of Northern Ireland should be the unifying factor. The Speaker's role has often varied between the different traditions. There is an outgoing DUP Speaker, so today, on behalf of the DUP, I say that we will support Alex Maskey as the new Speaker. In doing so, we will put forward our own candidate for Deputy Speaker and will support that person to be the Principal Deputy Speaker, when the time comes.

I urge all Members to take this new opportunity to work together and to take this first step. People want to see delivery that will better their lives.

Mrs O'Neill: Tá áthas mór orm Alex Maskey a mholadh mar Cheann Comhairle. It is my real pleasure to nominate my friend and colleague Alex Maskey for the position of Speaker of the Assembly. Alex is someone whose professionalism, dedication and commitment have embodied his involvement in politics for many decades. Alex served as the first Sinn Féin councillor on Belfast City Council and later as the first republican mayor in the

history of Belfast. In both roles, he always demonstrated a willingness to represent all citizens equally. He is a tireless and fearless advocate for those most in need in our community. Alex has always reached out right across our society and proved that he can be a voice for everyone.

As a key figure in the negotiations leading up to the Good Friday Agreement and in all subsequent negotiations, Alex has always demonstrated at all times his determination and commitment to encouraging discussion and dialogue. Serving as a Committee Chair, he provided a platform for debate. He gets business done, all the time making sure that he shows no fear or favour to anyone, and I am sure that that is exactly what he will bring to the role. He will bring all his enormous experience and years of dedication to political life to the position of Speaker. I also have no doubt that he will act at all times with determined professionalism and impartiality. I urge Members to support Alex Maskey for the position of Speaker of the Assembly, the Ceann Comhairle.

Ms Mallon: Three years we have waited to gather in the Chamber. People will rightly wonder why it has taken us so long. The fundamental test of whether all this will work is if there is a genuine change in the mindset, attitude and behaviour of all of us, all political parties. The election of Patsy McGlone would very much send the message that this is a new way of operating and working with one another. Patsy McGlone, whom it is my privilege to nominate, is a man of great integrity and fairness. I do not need to list his qualities — qualities that make him perfect for the role — because Members all know them. This, however, will be a very difficult time in the Assembly. The position of Speaker is a very important one, so I urge Members to consider carefully the role and to vote to elect my party colleague Patsy McGlone.

Dr Aiken: I echo some of the comments that have been made here. It has been far too long since the Assembly has been up and running. Whoever takes on the role of Speaker has to be somebody who brings a considerable degree of tact, diplomacy, knowledge and experience to the role. I cannot think of anybody in the Assembly who would be better suited to that role than Roy Beggs. He is one of the longest-standing Members of the Assembly, going back to 1998. Anybody who has known Roy through his work on Committees or as an MLA or, indeed, from some of the times that he has sat in the Chair in which you are sitting now, Mr Acting Speaker, knows that he is of the utmost integrity. What the Assembly needs, going forward, is somebody who makes sure that it is seen to do what the people of Northern Ireland want it to do. I say clearly that I fully recommend and support Roy Beggs, and I would like you all to do the same.

Mrs Long: First of all, I would like to add to what Peter Weir said in respect of paying tribute to Robin Newton. I have worked with Robin over many years, both in the city council and in the Assembly, and he is also a constituency colleague. I thank him for what was, I have to say, a historic time as the Presiding Officer of the House, if not necessarily in the way he would have wished. I thank him for his patience at times and for his judgement when it was required.

I think all of us meet here today with the same ambition: that the Assembly will function well for all the people of Northern Ireland. For that to be a reality, it will not depend on words on paper produced by two Governments; it will

depend on changed attitudes and approaches from those of us who are called to show leadership.

My expectation was and our belief as a party is that the post of Speaker should rotate among all the parties; therefore, we will support Patsy McGlone for the post of Speaker on this occasion. We believe that it is appropriate that the smaller parties in the Chamber be given the opportunity to show leadership in key roles in the House and that there is fairness and equity in how those are distributed across the parties. I put on record that that is no reflection either on the calibre or the ability of the other candidates who have been proposed. I have no doubt that, in whatever role they find themselves at the end of this process, we will be able to work with them constructively and for the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: “New Decade, New Approach” is the supposed catchphrase of the day, and, yet, here we are, on the very first item of business, and it is “New Decade, Old Approach”, old carve-up between the DUP and Sinn Féin. If that is how things will continue — I suspect it is — nothing has changed, nothing is new and nothing good will come of it. The spectacle of seeing the DUP obediently troop through the Lobbies to support a Sinn Féin Speaker will not be lost on many.

Of the three candidates, I would much prefer either of the other two, both of whom have been Deputy Speakers in the House. Both have acquitted themselves in that regard. Both have the personality and the capacity to do the job. Neither of them has baggage that should prevent them from doing the job, and neither of them has baggage that would proclaim loud and clear that this is not a new approach but the same old, same old.

Question put, That Mr Alex Maskey be Speaker of this Assembly.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 51; Noes 32.

AYES

Nationalist

Ms 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 McCartney, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr Maskey, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Unionist

Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mr McCartney.

NOES

Nationalist

Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr O’Toole.

Unionist

Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Wells.

Other

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Butler and Mr Chambers.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>83</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>[61.4%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>[69.2%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>[64.9%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Ms Bailey, Miss Woods.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr Alex Maskey be Speaker of this Assembly.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Robinson): I formally declare that Alex Maskey has been elected Speaker. I invite him to take the Chair. *[Applause.]*

(Mr Speaker [Mr Maskey] in the Chair)

Mr Speaker: OK, Members. First of all, I offer a hearty thank-you to all those who gave me their support today. It is a very important statement that it came from such a significant cross-community basis. It is, indeed, an honour to be elected as the Speaker of this new Assembly. As the Assembly meets today, we do so with the sole intention of delivering for all the people of the North and in this jurisdiction. It is my hope that this work is done in a spirit of generosity, cooperation and delivery of good government based fundamentally on integrity and respect.

We enter the new Assembly today on the basis of a deal that can create credible and sustainable politics here in the North, where basic rights are guaranteed and public services are delivered for all. People are hopeful, in my view — it has been widely said over the last number of days — that this new Assembly can deliver for them. It is all of our responsibility to make these ambitions a reality. Today, that hope converges with opportunity. It is time to renew and rekindle a political environment of reconciliation and respect, and to deliver on the promise of a new approach to politics in this decade. Go raibh míle, míle maith agaibh.

Election of the Deputy Speakers

Mr Speaker: In accordance with section 39 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we will now commence the election of the Deputy Speakers. The procedure for electing Deputy Speakers will be the same as that for the election of the Speaker. I will ask for proposals, which must be seconded. I will then confirm that the Member accepts the nomination and will continue in this way until there are no further proposals.

I remind Members that a debate may take place after I announce that the time for proposals has passed, and Members will have three minutes to make their contribution.

Do we have any proposals for the office of Deputy Speaker?

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, it is my great pleasure to put forward the name of Christopher Stalford MLA.

Mr Speaker: Is there a seconder for that proposal?

Mr Lyons: Mr Speaker, I second Mrs Foster's nomination.

Mr Speaker: Does the Member nominated, Christopher Stalford, accept the nomination?

Mr Stalford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Is there a further proposal?

Mr Aiken: Mr Speaker, I propose Mr Roy Beggs MLA.

Mr Speaker: Do we have a seconder for Mr Roy Beggs?

Mr Butler: I second that proposal, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Does Mr Beggs accept the nomination?

Mr Beggs: Yes, I am willing to accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Is there a further proposal?

Ms Mallon: Yes, Mr Speaker. I nominate Mr Patsy McGlone for the office of Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Do we have a seconder for that nomination?

Ms S Bradley: Mr Speaker, I second that proposal.

Mr Speaker: Does Mr McGlone accept the nomination?

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Glacaim leis an mholadh sin, agus gabhaim buíochas le mo chara Nichola Mallon as sin a dhéanamh. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I accept the nomination, and I thank Nichola Mallon for the proposal.

1.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Go raibh maith agat. Any further proposals? There are no further proposals. The time for proposals has now expired, and we move on.

A number of Members have indicated that they wish to speak. I remind Members that they may speak only once in the debate. Having consulted with the Whips, I will allow Members up to three minutes in which to speak. I will allow around half an hour for contributions.

Mr Weir: One of the virtues and vices of being involved in politics for a long time, and, indeed, of growing older, is that I have known many of the people involved for a long time. I mentioned earlier knowing the outgoing Speaker,

Robin Newton, for two decades. I have known Christopher Stalford for probably more than 20 years. I have known him so long that one could say that I have known him since before he was young. *[Laughter.]* Down the years, he has mellowed and become more informal. *[Laughter.]* It is undoubtedly the case that, had this plenary sitting been held several years ago, he would have been wearing two waistcoats rather than one.

For my sins, I was Christopher's first employer, so any subsequent blame will be laid very much at my door. Christopher is somebody who has an intense interest in politics, right to his fingertips. He has a great knowledge and great skills. Like the outgoing Speaker, he is also a family man, and, over the years, we have seen an expanding family. He is someone who brings a wealth of experience to the post. Prior to being a Member of the Assembly, he served as a councillor on Belfast City Council for a number of years. During that period, he had representative roles as High Sheriff of Belfast and Deputy Lord Mayor of Belfast. Therefore, the duties of hosting events and ensuring good order in the Chamber that fall to any Deputy Speaker are ones that Christopher is well blessed in.

We have seen the contribution that he has made to this Chamber. For all of us on these Benches, the quick wit, the snappy comments, the interventions and the great speeches will be greatly missed when he is in the Chair. In South Belfast, he serves probably the most diverse constituency in Northern Ireland. He is someone who brings a wealth of experience to the role, and I have no hesitation in supporting Christopher Stalford for Deputy Speaker and, subsequently, for Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No further Members have indicated that they wish to speak, so we will move on to the vote.

Question, That Mr Christopher Stalford be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr Christopher Stalford be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

[Applause.]

Question, That Mr Roy Beggs be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr Roy Beggs be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

[Applause.]

Question, That Mr Patsy McGlone be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr Patsy McGlone be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

[Applause.]

Mr Speaker: Members, as three Deputy Speakers have been elected, that concludes this item of business. I offer my congratulations to the successful candidates and look forward to working in partnership with all of the Deputy Speakers.

Committee Business

Business Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion to appoint the Business Committee will be treated as a business motion, so there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That the following shall be appointed to be members of the Business Committee:

*The Speaker (ex officio);
Ms Kellie Armstrong;
Ms Clare Bailey;
Mr Robbie Butler;
Mrs Dolores Kelly;
Mr Gordon Lyons;
Mr Declan McAleer;
Mr Colin McGrath;
Mr Andrew Muir;
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín;
Mr George Robinson; and
Mr John Stewart — [Mr Speaker]*

Assembly Business

Appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I will conduct the process of filling the offices in accordance with the procedures set out in section 16 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44(1).

I will begin by asking the nominating officer of the largest political party to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the First Minister. I will then ask the nominating officer of the largest political party of the second largest political designation to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be deputy First Minister.

As the persons nominated to fill the vacancies shall not take up office until each of them has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office contained in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, when I have received both nominations, I will ask each of the persons nominated to accept the nomination and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office.

Before we proceed, Members may find it helpful if the Pledge of Office is read into the record:

"To pledge:

(a) to discharge in good faith all the duties of office;

(b) commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means;

(c) to serve all the people of Northern Ireland equally, and to act in accordance with the general obligations on government to promote equality and prevent discrimination;

(ca) to promote the interests of the whole community represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly towards the goal of a shared future;

(cb) to participate fully in the Executive Committee, the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council;

(cc) to observe the joint nature of the offices of First Minister and deputy First Minister;

(cd) to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts as set out in paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement;

(ce) to support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and to support all efforts to uphold it;

(cf) to work collectively with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve a society free of paramilitarism;

(cg) to challenge all paramilitary activity and associated criminality;

(ch) to call for, and to work together with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve, the

disbandment of all paramilitary organisations and their structures;

(ci) to challenge paramilitary attempts to control communities;

(cj) to support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism;

(ck) to accept no authority, direction or control on my political activities other than my democratic mandate alongside my own personal and party judgment;

(d) to participate with colleagues in the preparation of a programme for government;

(e) to operate within the framework of that programme when agreed within the Executive Committee and endorsed by the Assembly;

(f) to support, and act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee and Assembly;

(g) to comply with the Ministerial Code of Conduct.

Paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement states:

"We believe that the essential elements of support for law and order include endorsing fully the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the criminal justice system, actively encouraging everyone in the community to co-operate fully with the PSNI in tackling crime in all areas and actively supporting all the policing and criminal justice institutions, including the Policing Board."

Members, the Pledge of Office has now been read into the record of proceedings, and I will proceed with the nomination process.

I have received notification from the nominating officer of the DUP advising me that Mr Gordon Lyons will serve as nominating officer for the party for this item of business. I call Gordon Lyons to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the First Minister and allow him up to three minutes to say a few words in support of the nomination.

Mr Lyons: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. It is a delight for me to be able to stand here today and, on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, nominate Mrs Arlene Foster MLA for the position of First Minister of Northern Ireland.

We have come a long way in the last number of years, and I know, having spoken to many people right across Northern Ireland, that people want us to get on with the job here. They want us to work and to deliver on the issues that matter to them. We all know what they are. We all know the very difficult job we have in front of us, but that job starts today. It starts with the nomination of First Minister and deputy First Minister and other Ministers so that we can form an Executive so that this Assembly can sit and do the job we were elected to do.

I absolutely agree with those outside who say we should have been here before now. We all would like to have been here doing our jobs sooner than we were able to today. Nevertheless, we are here. It is the time now to get on with this work. Again, I say on behalf of my party that we are delighted to be able to nominate Arlene Foster to the position of First Minister of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Mrs Arlene Foster, are you willing to take up the office of First Minister and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mrs Foster: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of First Minister, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: I have received a letter from the nominating officer of Sinn Féin advising me that Conor Murphy will serve as its nominating officer for this item of business. I call Mr Murphy to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the deputy First Minister.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus comhghairdeas. It gives me great pleasure to nominate Michelle O'Neill for the position of deputy First Minister. She follows on in that post from our late, great friend Martin McGuinness, who served with such distinction as deputy First Minister in the Assembly for many years. I know that Michelle will bring the same commitment to genuine power-sharing, to equality for all our citizens, to reaching out across the divide and to ensuring that we try to make this institution and the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement function according to their purpose as set out in that agreement, which was on the basis of equality, respect and parity of esteem for all who serve here and all those we represent right across the community.

I am very confident that Michelle, alongside the First Minister, will fulfil that role, and we look forward to the Assembly beginning a new journey, one that is about genuine power-sharing and the delivery of services for the people we represent. I am pleased to nominate Michelle O'Neill.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Mrs Michelle O'Neill, are you willing to take up the office of deputy First Minister and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Deimhním go bhfuil mé toilteanach glacadh leis an ról seo. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of deputy First Minister, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in the 1998 Act.

Mrs Foster appointed First Minister and Mrs O'Neill appointed deputy First Minister.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much. There will now be an opportunity for speeches. I will begin by calling the First Minister and then the deputy First Minister to address the Assembly.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. May I first of all congratulate you as you are elected to serve as Speaker of the House? It is a role with much responsibility to ensure that Members on all Benches are heard. I look forward to working with you and, indeed, the broader Speaker team that has just been elected.

To serve as the First Minister of Northern Ireland is deeply humbling and brings with it enormous responsibility to the people whom we represent. This is the fourth anniversary of when I first took up this role. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then, but today the real work starts.

2.00 pm

The past three years have focused too much on division and recrimination. There is plenty of blame to go around, but the time has come to move forward with resolution. The lessons have been learnt, and it is time to get Northern Ireland moving forward again. However, the restoration of the Assembly and the Executive alone will not solve our waiting lists or reduce the staff pressures in our hospitals. Simply filling posts will not resolve the mental health challenges that our society is facing. There needs to be action, and decisions need to be made. The Bengoa report needs to be implemented. It already has cross-party agreement. It has a 10-year plan, but that was in 2016, and we have lost three years. To deliver this transformation will not be easy. It will require courageous decisions by Members on all sides of the House. I pledge to work in a collegiate manner with all the parties across the Chamber to ensure that our public services are improved, that every citizen feels valued and that we lay a solid foundation for the next generation.

In 2021, Northern Ireland will celebrate its centenary, and we want to do so with safer streets, better schools and a first-class health service, free at the point of need. The National Health Service is unique to the United Kingdom, and we must work together to protect and strengthen it.

In the Chamber, there are people who are British, Irish, Northern Irish and European. There are many identities. Those of us here today should have each of our identities respected. That is why we reached the fair and balanced deal, which caters for British and Irish, as well as for new and emerging identities. We want everyone to feel at home in Northern Ireland. In particular, I draw attention to the commitments to implement fully the armed forces covenant and establish a veterans' commissioner. Those are very significant for young men and women from these shores who have defended, or continue to defend, democracy all over the world.

Mr Speaker, you and other Members in the Chamber are Irish republicans. I am a unionist with a strong British identity. Regardless of our differences, we must seek out common ground. When I visited Our Lady's Grammar School in Newry, the pupils gave me a lovely picture as a gift. It has hung in my office upstairs ever since, just above my shoulder, and, in Irish, it states, "Together we are strong". We have many differences. Michelle's narrative of the past 40 years could not be any more different from mine, and I am not sure that we will ever agree on much about the past, but we can agree that there was too much suffering and that we cannot allow society to drift back and allow division to grow.

Northern Ireland is succeeding in many ways. It is time for Stormont to move forward and show that together we are stronger, for the benefit of everyone. Fixing problems in schools and reforming our health service so that people receive timely treatment should be a priority for all parties. Therefore, let us get down to work and, most importantly, let us get Northern Ireland moving again.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): I also say comhghairdeas on your new position, a Cheann Comhairle. I look forward to your leadership in the Assembly.

This is a defining moment for our politics here. From today, the parties represented in the Chamber undertake to cooperate in every way that we can in order to rebuild public trust and confidence in, and engagement with, the Assembly and its Executive. Our mission must be to deliver good politics. Our mission must be to deliver on health, education and jobs for everyone, right across our communities.

I see no contradiction whatsoever in declaring our firm commitment to power-sharing with unionism in the Stormont Assembly whilst also initiating a mature and inclusive debate about new political arrangements that examine Ireland's future beyond Brexit. Similarly, I see no contradiction in unionism working the existing constitutional arrangements whilst rightly taking its place in the conversation about what a new Ireland would look like.

We can do this while maintaining our independent, distinct political identities and working in the best interests of all the people. That is my firm commitment. After three years without functioning institutions, the five parties are here to form a new Executive. It is my hope that we do so united in our determination to deliver a stable power-sharing coalition that works on the basis of openness and transparency, accountability and good faith and with no surprises.

I am really honoured to follow in the footsteps of my dear friend and comrade Martin McGuinness. Taking up the position of deputy First Minister as joint head of Government, I, too, pledge to follow the example that he set by actively promoting reconciliation and building bridges that we all can cross to end sectarianism and bigotry. Resistance to equality caused the Executive to fall. A refusal to embrace citizens' identities and rights left people frustrated, angry and divided. That cannot be repeated. Today, each of us is called to lead; to build common cause for a society that makes room for and gives respect to every citizen; to deliver a power-sharing Government that is truly grounded in fairness and inclusion and has the courage to lead from the front in these times of change. Our politics must embrace civic society. Trade unions, the voluntary and community sector, businesses, academia, farmers, church leaders and students all must have a permanent place and a space to advise, input and hold the Assembly and Executive to account. We must work together to solve the problems that face this society. We will apply the full powers and resources available to us to address the major issues of the day faced by all those whom we represent.

I welcome the historic official recognition of the Irish language in this state. The guarantees for the language in law represent meaningful parity of esteem for the community from which I proudly come. It also means that the equality, mutual respect and all-Ireland approaches enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement are being embraced and that we can deliver on the promises of 1998 to a new generation of young people.

Today, we have a basis on which to move forward in building a fairer society and to build good government. We will institute necessary reforms across the board in order not only to get things done but to get things right. In this new Administration, we must have shared values and policy objectives set out in a new Programme for Government.

Yesterday, our nurses and healthcare workers had to take industrial action. Let us make that the last day they have to do that. This Executive will move immediately to settle the ongoing healthcare workers' pay parity dispute. Our health service is in crisis and demands our urgent attention. Waiting lists are unacceptable, and the health service needs to be reformed: we have a big, big job of work to do.

As we face into the great uncertainties of Brexit, it is imperative that we redouble our efforts to develop and rebuild a modern, competitive and sustainable economy in which we open doors to trade, investment, jobs and tourism. We need decent jobs that value workers and protect their rights. We need to improve our competitiveness through investing in our public structures, our public services and our infrastructure.

To conclude, as we approach the centenary of partition, let us not refight the battles of the past. It is time to bring people together. We can open doors, let the future in, give people hope and give our young people opportunity. It is my sincere hope that 2020 is a time of real change that reinvents the optimism and the hope that we have experienced before but our young people have not. It is time now for parties to have courage as we all choose hope over fear and enter a new era of politics in this society. I wish all Members the very best, particularly all the new MLAs, and I welcome and congratulate all the Ministers who will be appointed into government today. We have two years left of the mandate: let us go out and make a difference.

Mr Speaker: There will now be an opportunity for a representative from each party to speak. Members should limit their remarks to not more than three minutes. I have the names of some Members who have already indicated that they wish to speak, but I ask all Members who want to contribute on behalf of their party to approach the Table and add their name to the speaking list. It is not compulsory to do so.

Ms P Bradley: Today is a good day for Northern Ireland. It is a good day for Northern Ireland because, after three years of political vacuum, there will be a First Minister and a deputy First Minister heading up a cross-party Executive, taking decisions and working for the benefit of every one of the people whom we all represent. I am delighted to have the opportunity to pay tribute to and to congratulate my party leader, Arlene Foster, who returns as our First Minister today. She, like all of us, wants to get Northern Ireland moving forward again. That, as we all know, will be a task that requires hard work and dedication. Those are qualities that, I know, Arlene does not lack.

Much has changed since the Assembly last met. The challenges facing our health service are most evident, and, more than ever, stable government is needed. As we look ahead, there is a need for leadership, and, within the Democratic Unionist Party, Arlene is someone who leads from the front and is not afraid to do so. Again, I know that she is ready, willing and able to take her place in the Executive and Assembly alongside the deputy First Minister.

I congratulate the deputy First Minister, and I know that she too recognises the challenges that we face in Northern Ireland. I worked with her previously when I chaired the Committee, and we had a good working relationship. I wish her well. I also take the opportunity to congratulate

you, Mr Speaker, and all those from all the parties around the Chamber who will take their seat at the Executive table today.

As I said, this is a good day for Northern Ireland, but it is a day that represents the beginning of much hard work. Success will be measured by delivery for all the people of Northern Ireland, and, as First Minister and as my party leader, Arlene will have the full support of everyone on these Benches as we seek to get Northern Ireland moving forward again.

Ms Mallon: Mr Speaker, in addition to paying tribute to the outgoing Speaker, we wish you the best in your new post.

As I have said previously, we have waited three years, and people will rightly wonder why it has taken so long. Our view is that the deal could have been much better and contains missed opportunities, but, for us, there are two key tests. The first is how our Executive and Assembly operate, and the second is what they actually do to transform our citizens' lives. We have all committed to greater openness and transparency in the Executive; we have all committed to seeing the end of the abuse of power and the reign of spads; and we have all committed to opening up this place and our Government to better involve our citizens. That is why we pushed hard for the citizens' assembly.

There are also policies that we have all committed to. We are all committed to tackling the crises in our health and education systems and delivering pay justice. We pushed hard with other parties to secure welfare mitigations so that we can protect our low-income families and our disabled citizens. We pushed as well for an anti-poverty strategy — a meaningful anti-poverty strategy — and a commitment to build new and more social and affordable homes. We have also committed to tackling regional imbalance in investment in our economy, and we have committed to the expansion of Magee. We have committed to climate action, among many, many things. They are big commitments, and we have been pushing both Governments because we need to see clear financial support, but all of us must honour those commitments.

We will go into the Executive and will be in the Chamber because we genuinely want to see power-sharing. We genuinely and sincerely want to work with all parties so that we can improve the lives of everybody living in Northern Ireland. We have entered in good faith, and we take it at face value that everyone else is acting in the same spirit. We will play our part, and I look forward, as a party, to working with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, with Ministers in the Executive and with all MLAs across all political parties.

We will always be reviewing and monitoring our position and how we operate — the people of Northern Ireland deserve that — and we will always be honest throughout this mandate with the people of Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

Mr Aiken: It would be churlish of me not to welcome the appointment of the new First Minister and deputy First Minister.

For us, the key to this is being able to transform Northern Ireland and to make it work again. I say to all the new MLAs who are in the Chamber: we have a real task ahead

of us, because if we have seen anything over the past couple of years, it is that Northern Ireland desperately needs open, transparent, accountable and responsible government that is open to everybody in Northern Ireland, to see how we will make changes.

I look at the Gallery and I see members of the Civil Service and others. A considerable amount of work needs to be done on reform. The Northern Ireland political and government machine is broken. It needs to be fixed. The fact that we will be in receipt of considerable — albeit, we do not yet know how much — largesse from our Government to sort out some of our problems gives a burden to us to make sure we appropriately manage those resources and deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. Be in no doubt whatsoever: over the next two years, or however long the Assembly is going to run, we must be able to make our government work. So, the Ulster Unionist Party pledges to work closely with our other partners in government, but we want to see a genuine transformation. We must change the culture of government in Northern Ireland. If we do not, Mr Speaker, First Minister and deputy First Minister, we are doomed to fail. We cannot allow that to happen.

Mrs Long: Mr Speaker, first of all, I congratulate you and your team of Deputy Speakers on your appointments.

There is significant pressure facing the Assembly, and all of us, given the backlog of Assembly business that needs to be undertaken in swift time, and we will work with you, constructively, in order to ensure that that can be done in as expeditious a manner as possible.

A lot of water, much of it turbulent, has passed under the bridge in the past three years. However, I do not believe that today is a day for recriminations. It is a day for focusing forward and for looking forward to the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. Our commitment throughout the past three years has been to deliver the restoration and reform of the institutions to deliver fit-for-purpose, accountable and sustainable government that can deliver for all the people of Northern Ireland.

The deal that the Governments have put forward is imperfect. I think all of us recognise that it is a compromise on the positions that each of the parties took in the negotiations, but we cannot ask others to do what we are not willing to do ourselves, and, on balance, I believe that it is an honourable compromise and that, if implemented with goodwill and in a spirit of cooperation and inclusion, it can form the basis on which we can deliver improved government for the people here in Northern Ireland.

I congratulate the First Minister and deputy First Minister on their appointment to their roles. Much of the heavy lifting will have to be done by the two main parties, as is always the case, but I reassure both of you — through the Speaker — that we will not be found wanting in playing our role in supporting you in the job that you have to do, in encouraging you and in being an effective support where you are acting in the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland, and, on occasion, being a robust challenge where we fear that that is not the case, but we hope that we will do that too in a spirit of constructive engagement and one where we work together to deliver.

There is optimism outside this place. It would be, perhaps, overstating our position as one that is optimistic. We are

realistic about the prospects of this agreement — there is a lot of work to be done — but we are also determined that it will succeed, and we will play whatever role we can in ensuring that it does.

You have my best wishes for the remainder of this term and for the future of the Assembly.

Ms Bailey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I also congratulate you and your team on your new role and our First Minister and deputy First Minister on their reappointment.

This is a positive development for Northern Ireland today and one in which we can hopefully begin to move forward. After three years of stagnation, I think we can all agree that people have suffered enough. While there is much in the draft agreement, there is so much there that has been promised before but failed to be delivered. If we are seriously intent in the Chamber on doing things differently, it is delivery we need to do. Let delivery be the new approach for this new decade.

Climate breakdown is the biggest threat we face, yet we have done so little to address it. People are so far ahead of our politics and policy, and they are demanding that we step up. The Green Party is very encouraged to note the very high level of environmental commitments given in the draft deal. Promises, such as a strategy to reduce our carbon emissions in the light of the Paris accord, an energy strategy to transition to a carbon-neutral society, an independent environmental protection agency, long overdue and long campaigned for, the elimination of plastic pollution, an economic strategy that will include a green new deal, and the close-down of the RHI, are all very welcome, but we are the only place across these islands yet to see and endorse a climate Act.

Let this new decade and this new approach be one where Northern Ireland is no longer left behind as a place apart, because, regardless of anyone's identity, a new Ireland is coming. It is here, it is called the climate emergency, and it knows no borders, so we will all be affected. We truly believe that today a platform exists to create a sustainable, accountable devolved Executive, Assembly and society. The Green Party really hopes the will is there for that as well.

Mr Allister: I get it that people are desperate to have their health service fixed, but I will not join in the pretence that an Executive here that can exist only by the grace and favour of a party that does not want Northern Ireland to exist will bring them the stability they crave.

I also remind the public that the present health crisis was made in Stormont. It was the Executive that broke with pay parity for nurses. It was the Executive that, through successive Ministers, radically reduced the number of beds in our hospitals. Of course, we are here today only because of a double blackmail: blackmail of a Secretary of State who says, "I have the money to fix the health service, but I will not give it unless there is an Executive", a Secretary of State who shamelessly put the life of an Executive above the life of the sick; and, of course, the blackmail of Sinn Féin that you can have a Government only if you pay the ransom that they demand.

Indeed, it is a commentary in itself on the perversity of these governmental arrangements that, although it was Sinn Féin that tore down the institutions, for what they were worth, it was the DUP that had to pay the price to get them back, and what a price it was: to eat a mountain of

their own words, laced with yoghurt and curry, a special brand of Campbell's soup.

What a digestive system the DUP has.

I remember in 2017 the call of the First Minister on Irish language legislation was, "Not on my watch", yet, here today, she is the handmaiden of that very legislation. Here today, she is the sponsor of an Irish language enforcer who will put Irish upon every public authority, including this House, where we will have the ludicrous spectacle of needless interpretation. In every council chamber, we will put our ratepayers to the needless cost of translation.

There may well be a honeymoon period for the Executive, at least until the Irish language legislation is safely on the statute book and at least until the innocent victims have been betrayed —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to wind up his remarks.

Mr Allister: — by the passing of the Stormont House Agreement's unbalanced legacy proposals. At the end of it, however, this is only a staging post for Sinn Féin. The First Minister knows that. She has known that since her infamous —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to wind up.

Mr Allister: — reptilian turn of phrase, when she knew what she would be doing if she gave in to the Irish language demand, but power — any power — is the supreme draw. Even now, we are not even going —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to wind up his remarks.

Mr Allister: — to have an Opposition. I will do my best to give you as much opposition as I can.

Mr Speaker: OK. The honeymoon might not last that long, so thank you very much for your remarks, Mr Allister.

Mr Carroll: It is plainly obvious that the Assembly will have some major issues to deal with urgently in the days and weeks ahead. We live in a society where increasing numbers of people are utilising food banks largely because of the welfare reform policies that were implemented by previous Administrations in this Chamber. We have a crisis in the health system as waiting lists grow. We have a deep and profound crisis in the education system as school budgets are stretched to the limit. It is by those measures that we will judge the conduct of the new Executive and, indeed, anyone who holds office in it.

People Before Profit was not part of constructing the recent deal that was agreed by the five main parties. It is not our deal; it is your deal. We were not part of the talks. We were excluded from them despite our call for them to be open, all-party talks. We were not permitted to contribute to the content of the deal. We think that that was the wrong decision and one that disenfranchised the voice of smaller parties and those who voted for us. For that reason, the job of People Before Profit, as we see it, is to collaborate and work with people where we can and see that issues of a positive nature in the deal are carried through. It is also our role to highlight where we see flaws in the deal, not only because they may have bad consequences but because they may act not as a solution to the underlying tensions in the Assembly but as a bridge to the next crisis, whenever that may be.

I pay tribute to the nurses, health workers and trade unions, who so evidently transformed the political debate here. They put on the agenda in the most direct way the question of pay parity and safe staffing levels, and confronted everyone in the Chamber with the real crisis in the health service and refused to back down. Those workers are the primary drivers of any progress that we might see. It is worth remembering that any change that we might see on pay parity or investment in the health service was not something that was gifted to us by the British or Irish Governments or even the five parties here. It is something that came from the action and struggle of those workers and unions, so I congratulate them on what they have been able to achieve thus far.

Finally, I welcome the fact that there is an aspiration in the deal to resolve pay parity. Thus far, however, unions have still not been made an offer, and there is no cast-iron commitment as to how precisely the pay dispute will be resolved and whether pay parity will indeed be restored. That must be a top priority for the Executive formed here today.

2.30 pm

Ms Sugden: I congratulate you and your deputies on your appointments. I am, however, somewhat disappointed that there are no women in the Speaker's Office, but we make up for that in the Executive Office, and I offer my sincere congratulations to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I worked with both women in government — gosh, over three years ago now — and I can put on record that they are incredibly capable and can do wonderful things for Northern Ireland if there is the will. I hope today is a demonstration of that will, because we need to take Northern Ireland forward. It has got to the point now at which we cannot continue in this vein.

I also congratulate the Ministers who will be appointed this afternoon. I believe that it is a wasted opportunity that none has decided to go into opposition. Do not fear opposition: opposition improves legislation. If policy cannot uphold the challenge that other Members provide, it is not good policy, and no one benefits from that. I do, however, appreciate that the stability of Northern Ireland requires that we have a five-party Executive, and I, as an independent Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, will support that Executive in the work that we do because, critically, moving forward, that work needs to happen.

We have had nearly 20 years of what I would describe as political party nonsense. Now, moving forward, the focus of the Assembly needs to be on good governance that looks at the needs of the people outside the Chamber. Maybe, for once, we will put those people first instead of the political parties that sit in this Chamber.

Today is a fantastic day for Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland are ecstatic that we are here on their behalf. It is important to note that each one of us, in the mandates that we all have, represents the people of Northern Ireland, whom we disrespect when we disrespect one another in the Chamber. I cannot imagine that the problems that have existed over the past three years will be fixed overnight, and it is important that, in the Chamber, we set an expectation that we will not fix them overnight. If anything, we need a root-and-branch review of every Department in Northern Ireland, but it is good that the

wheels are now moving, and I look forward to working with each and every one of you.

Mr Speaker: No more Members have indicated that they wish to speak. In order to enable me to chair the remaining business, I propose, with your leave, Members, a short suspension to allow me to be properly briefed. The Assembly is, by leave, suspended until 3.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 2.33 pm and resumed at 3.05 pm.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Now, Mr Speaker, that you are Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, would you like to take the opportunity to apologise for and withdraw your statement of 2018, when you referred to Northern Ireland as a "putrid little statelet"?

Mr Speaker: Not a point of order, Mr Allister, thank you.

Appointment of Junior Ministers

Mr Speaker: I want to advise the House that I have received correspondence from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in relation to the appointment of junior Ministers.

“Dear Speaker,

We write to inform you of our intention to appoint both junior Ministers in the Executive Office today. Those Assembly Members being nominated are:

*Gordon Lyons
Declan Kearney*

Yours sincerely,

*Arlene Foster MLA Michelle O’Neill MLA
First Minister Deputy First Minister”*

Mr Speaker: Will Gordon Lyons affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Lyons: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of junior Minister, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office, as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Gordon Lyons appointed a junior Minister.

Mr Speaker: Congratulations.

Will Declan Kearney affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Kearney: Thig liom a rá go bhfuil mé breá toilteanach glacadh le hoifig an Aire, agus dearbhaim téarmaí an ghealltanais oifige, mar atá siad leagtha amach sa sceideal do Acht NI 1998.

I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office, as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Declan Kearney appointed a junior Minister.

Mr Speaker: Comhghairdeas, Declan.

That concludes the business of appointing the junior Ministers.

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

Mr Speaker: Sorry, just let me make this final point. I congratulate both junior Ministers on taking up office.

Mrs Long: I am not sure if other Members in the Chamber are having the difficulty that I am having in hearing you, Mr Speaker. There seems to be a problem with your mic, and it is incredibly difficult for us to hear what you are saying. In order to be helpful, we would like to be able to hear you better.

Mr Speaker: I will certainly endeavour to make sure that that does not go amiss in future. I am told that the mics are not working very well. I have been asked to give a bit of volume, so I will do my best. Apologies for that. As long as we do not have to go back to the start again, we are OK. *[Laughter.]* That concludes the business of appointing the junior Ministers. As I have said, congratulations to both.

Appointment of the Minister of Justice

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the filling of the office of the Minister of Justice. I will conduct a process for filling the office in accordance with the procedures set out in part 1A of schedule 4A to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44A. I will begin by asking for nominations. Any Member may rise and nominate another Member of the Assembly to hold the office of Minister of Justice. If Members rise from more than one party, I will call first the Member from the largest of those parties to make a nomination in accordance with convention.

I advise Members that the Act requires that one nomination must be processed before a further nomination can be made. I will, therefore, take only one nomination at a time and put the Question on that nomination. If the Assembly resolves by parallel consent that the Member nominated shall be Minister of Justice and that person takes up office as required by the Act and Standing Orders, no further nominations may be made. I will call for further nominations only if those conditions are not fulfilled.

Having consulted the party Whips, I will allow a Member making a nomination to speak for up to three minutes. Following that, there will be an opportunity for debate on the nomination, with Members also having an opportunity to speak for three minutes.

Standing Orders place a time constraint on the nomination process, and I will curtail the debate if necessary, unless, under Standing Order 44A(2), the Assembly approves a request for the time limit to be extended. In any event, if it appears that, before I put the Question, the time limit will be exceeded, I will ask the nominator to repeat the nomination after the debate.

As the person nominated to fill the vacancy shall not take up office until he or she has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office contained in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, after the Question has been determined, I will ask the person nominated to affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office, which was read into the record during the previous item of business.

Do I have any nominations for the office of Minister of Justice?

Ms Armstrong: I nominate my party leader, Naomi Long, for the position of Justice Minister.

Mr Speaker: If the Member wishes to speak, she has up to three minutes. It is not compulsory. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Armstrong: Thank you. I will try not to speak for too long, Mr Speaker.

I have been privileged to work with Naomi Long for a considerable time in the Alliance Party. Over the years, I have got to know Naomi as the person and the politician. Therefore, I am confident in nominating her for this role. She will make an effective Justice Minister and bring a considerable wealth of experience and strength to the Executive.

As part of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, there are many opportunities to be delivered and challenges to be resolved. Having an inclusive, five-party Executive will provide a collective commitment to delivering much-needed leadership and productive government. Naomi is committed to serving everyone

without fear or favour and irrespective of religion, class, colour, nationality, gender, sexual orientation or disability. Naomi is committed to making politics work in Northern Ireland for all our people and will work constructively, as she said earlier, with all our partners in government and across the Assembly to ensure that a fair and transparent service is delivered for everyone. For those and many other reasons, I and all my wider Alliance Party colleagues — my colleagues here in the Chamber and one who is not, Stewart Dickson, who, unfortunately, is recovering from major surgery in his fight against cancer and cannot be here today — believe that Naomi Long is the right person to take on the responsibility for such a sensitive and trusted issue as policing and justice and can be trusted to act in the best interests of the whole community.

I ask the Assembly to support an inclusive Executive and give their support to Naomi Long by voting for her to be our Justice Minister. I am pleased to nominate Naomi Long for the post.

Mr Speaker: Naomi Long has been nominated. Naomi Long, do you accept the nomination?

Mrs Long: Yes, Mr Speaker, I accept the nomination, and I thank Kellie for her words.

Mr Speaker: The nomination is now open for debate. I remind Members that they may speak for up to three minutes.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I wish you well in your role as Speaker. You are one of a select few, having served from 1998, and I have no doubt that that institutional memory and the relationships that you have built will stand you in good stead as you seek to navigate the Assembly through what I am sure will be, at times, passionate debates, as they should be in any debating Chamber. I wish you well in your role. I also wish the Deputy Speakers well.

I commend Claire Sugden for the role that she carried out during her time as Justice Minister. She operated in the Executive in a very dignified manner. I had the privilege of serving with her during that period. A very tenacious Justice Minister, she achieved significant things during that tenure and carried herself very well during that period. I want to put on record our appreciation of the service that she gave at that time.

We will support the nomination of Naomi Long to be Minister of Justice. This society faces a wide-ranging number of issues when it comes to these matters, but there is a way forward, by working together to address a lot of these areas. The document that has been agreed recognises the need for additional resources for police officers, and, when we look at the wide spectrum of issues in the criminal justice sector, we see that the Minister will have a lot of challenges. However, she will go into an Executive that will seek to operate with collective responsibility, and I trust that the Minister of Justice will have the support of the wider Executive as she takes up her role in providing support to her colleagues in the spirit of that collective responsibility.

Mr Murphy: We will also support Naomi Long for the position. The procedure that we are adopting today was devised as part of an agreement back in, I think, 2008, when we agreed to transfer powers of policing and justice from London to here. At that time, it was considered

necessary because it was such a sensitive and, perhaps, potentially controversial post and Department. It is long past time for us to move beyond that and not require a special procedure to elect the post. The performance of various Ministers of Justice has helped with that over the years, and I also pay tribute to Claire Sugden, the outgoing Minister of Justice. They have proved, over time, that the post no longer needs this type of procedure and that the allocation of the Department of Justice should be done alongside the normal running of d'Hondt for all the other Departments.

That will require legislation. My understanding is that it will require legislation in Westminster, so it is not possible to do it at this time, but it is my firm belief — I am certain, and we are certain — that this will be the last time we allocate the position under such a procedure and that we will move in the next mandate to allocate the Minister of Justice — the Department of Justice — under the normal run of d'Hondt. Nonetheless, we are pleased to support Naomi Long, and we wish her well in her endeavours over the next couple of years.

3.15 pm

Ms Mallon: I stand on behalf of the SDLP to commend Claire Sugden and to warmly congratulate Naomi Long. Throughout the talks process, we and our parties, alongside the Ulster Unionists, have worked hard and worked well together, and I look forward to continuing that cooperation, as with all parties, in the interests of everyone living in Northern Ireland. I must make the point, as we have on previous occasions, that the Justice Ministry should be run under d'Hondt and this must be the last time it is not.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: No, I will spare you that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Allister, for that magnanimous gesture to the other Members. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: It is the last one.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the debate. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind the Assembly that the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — that is for Jim; that is my magnanimity towards you — requires that the resolution must be passed by parallel consent.

Question, That Mrs Naomi Long be the Minister of Justice, put and agreed to.

Resolved (by parallel consent):

That Mrs Naomi Long be the Minister of Justice.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the Assembly and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that parallel consent has been demonstrated. I now ask Naomi Long to affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Speaker. You have chaired meetings at which I have been present, and I know that you will not indulge me much, but I would like to place on record that I am honoured to have the support of all sides of the House for the role I am about to take up. I am also honoured to be following to build on the considerable legacy of David Ford and the legacy of Claire Sugden, and I pay tribute to her. Whilst it was a short time in office, it

was, nevertheless, a significant time. I am happy to affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mrs Naomi Long appointed Minister of Justice.

Mr Speaker: I can now confirm that Naomi Long, having affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office, has taken up office as Minister of Justice in accordance with the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I offer Naomi my congratulations.

Ministerial Appointments

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the appointment of Ministers. I will conduct the process for filling these offices in accordance with the procedure set out in section 18 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44. I will ask the nominating officer of each political party, in the order required by the formula in section 18(5), to select an available ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it who is a member of his or her party and a Member of the Assembly. If a nominating officer declines to nominate, I will invite the nominating officer of the next political party determined by the formula to nominate a Member to hold ministerial office.

I therefore call on Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mrs Foster: I choose the Department for the Economy, and I nominate Diane Dodds MLA.

Mr Speaker: Will Diane Dodds confirm that she is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mrs Dodds: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister for the Economy, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mrs Diane Dodds appointed Minister for the Economy.

Mr Speaker: I call on Michelle O'Neill.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I nominate Conor Murphy to the post of Minister of Finance.

Mr Speaker: Will Conor Murphy confirm that he is willing to take up the office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Murphy: A Cheann Comhairle, tá mé toilteanach glacadh leis an ról seo. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Finance, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Conor Murphy appointed Minister of Finance.

Mr Speaker: I call on Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, I choose the Department of Education, and I nominate Peter Weir MLA.

Mr Speaker: Will Peter Weir confirm that he is willing to take up the office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Weir: Mr Speaker, I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Education, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Peter Weir appointed Minister of Education.

Mr Speaker: I call on Michelle O'Neill, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down

in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I confirm that we wish to take the Department for Communities, and I nominate Deirdre Hargey MLA as the Minister.

Mr Speaker: Will Deirdre Hargey confirm that she is willing to take up the office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Ms Hargey: Deimhním go bhfuil mé toilteanach glacadh leis an ról seo. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister for Communities, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Ms Deirdre Hargey appointed Minister for Communities.

Mr Speaker: I call on Dolores Kelly, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mrs D Kelly: Mr Speaker, on behalf of the SDLP, it is my particular pleasure to nominate our party's deputy leader, Nichola Mallon, as Minister for Infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: Will Nichola Mallon confirm that she is willing to take up the office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Ms Mallon: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister for Infrastructure, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I sincerely thank my party for the nomination.

Ms Nichola Mallon appointed Minister for Infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: I call on Steve Aiken, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly.

Dr Aiken: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I nominate Robin Swann MLA as the new Minister of Health for Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Will Robin Swann confirm that he is willing to take up — [*Laughter.*] Less of that.

Mr Swann: Mr Speaker, I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Health, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Robin Swann appointed Minister of Health.

Mr Speaker: I call on Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mrs Foster: What is left, and what we are very happy to take, is the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. I nominate Edwin Poots MLA.

Mr Speaker: Will Edwin Poots confirm that he is willing to take up the office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Poots: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Edwin Poots appointed Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Assembly for its patience. That concludes the appointment of Ministers under the d'Hondt process. I offer my congratulations to all those who have taken up office.

The next item of business in the Order Paper on this fine Saturday afternoon is the Adjournment. The Business Committee will meet after this sitting to consider an Order Paper for the next sitting. If the Business Committee agrees, an Order Paper will issue and be available electronically from the Business Office.

Adjourned at 3.26 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 14 January 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Good morning, Members. Maidin mhaith.

At the last sitting, it was announced that Mr Matthew O'Toole had been returned as a Member for South Belfast. For clarity, I would like to add that Mr O'Toole gave the undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered his designation in the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive just before the sitting on Saturday 11 January. That is just for the record. Of course, the Member is welcome.

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: This item relates to Question Time rescheduling.

Mr Butler: I beg to move

*That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for
14 January 2020.*

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

*That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 14
January 2020.*

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the Chamber and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Statutory Committees

Mr Speaker: As this is a business motion, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Orders 46 and 47, this Assembly determines that nine Statutory Committees shall be established as follows:

the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs;

the Committee for Communities;

the Committee for the Economy;

the Committee for Education;

the Committee for the Executive Office;

the Committee for Finance;

the Committee for Health;

the Committee for Infrastructure; and

the Committee for Justice.

Terms of reference, quorum and composition of the Committees shall be as prescribed in Standing Orders 48 and 49. — [Mr Butler.]

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I notice that the motion that we have just passed ties itself to Standing Orders 48 and 49. In consequence, does that mean that the Statutory Committees are going to continue with a membership of 11, because that is what, of course, those Standing Orders say?

Mr Speaker: The composition of the Committees is under consideration by the Business Committee, Mr Allister, so that will be a matter for further consideration by the Business Committee and, therefore, the House after that.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, it is not a matter for the Business Committee to change Standing Orders, surely, and, if Standing Orders provide for 11, the only manner in which you can avoid 11 is either to change Standing Orders or to suspend Standing Orders. Are we getting to the point where we will suspend that Standing Order?

Mr Speaker: I will make this the final ruling: the Business Committee will consider that and bring it back to the House for further consideration. At the moment, the membership will remain at 11 until a further change is made by the House.

Statutory Committees: Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons

Mr Speaker: In accordance with the procedure set out in Standing Order 48, I shall ask the nominating officer of each political party, in the order required by the formula contained in Standing Order 48, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his or her party and a Member of the Assembly to be the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson. I remind parties of the requirement of Standing Order 48(5) that:

“nominating officers shall prefer committees in which they do not have a party interest over those in which they do have a party interest.”

For the avoidance of doubt, that means I will expect parties to refrain as far as possible from selecting Committees that coincide with the ministerial offices held by their party.

I now call on Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the party that has the highest figure under the formula, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Mrs Foster: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I choose the Justice Committee, and I nominate Paul Givan to be the Chairman.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Givan: Yes, Mr Speaker.

Mr Paul Givan appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

Mr Speaker: I call on John O'Dowd to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a Member to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We select the Economy Committee and appoint Caoimhe Archibald to that post.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Dr Archibald: I am, a Cheann Comhairle.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald appointed Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Communities Committee and select Paula Bradley as the Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Ms P Bradley: I am, Mr Speaker.

Ms Paula Bradley appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.

Mr Speaker: I call again on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We select the Health Committee and appoint Colm Gildernew to that post.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Gildernew: Tá mé, I am a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Colm Gildernew appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Health.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mrs Dolores Kelly to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a Member to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. We select the Committee for the Executive Office, and I nominate Colin McGrath as Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McGrath: I am, Mr Speaker.

Mr Colin McGrath appointed Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Steve Aiken to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a Member to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Mr Butler: Mr Speaker, in line with Standing Orders, I will make the nomination. Is that OK?

Mr Speaker: You are saying that you are making the nomination.

Mr Butler: Yes, Mr Speaker. I sent a letter in this morning.

Mr Speaker: Did we receive that letter? We will just pause for a moment or two. I do not have sight of that. We do not have sight of that letter. Was it first-class post or second-class post?

Dr Aiken: You hope this is a transference, but we are not doing that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: You will just have to take your ease for a minute or two, Members. Sorry about this. It is a legal requirement.

Members, we can recommence. Steve, could you confirm that you have conferred to Robbie the responsibility of nominating officer?

Dr Aiken: For this one thing, Mr Speaker, I indeed confer the responsibility to my Chief Whip, Robbie Butler.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much. I now call on Robbie Butler to select and nominate.

Mr Butler: My apologies, Mr Speaker. I delivered it to the wrong office. I probably would not make a good postperson.

We take the Committee for Finance, and I nominate Steve Aiken. *[Applause.] [Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Some Members: No. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Aiken: Delighted to, chief.

Dr Steve Aiken appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Committee for Infrastructure, and I nominate Michelle McIlveen as Chairperson.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Miss McIlveen: I am, Mr Speaker.

Miss Michelle McIlveen appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: I call again on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We select the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, and we appoint Declan McAleer.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McAleer: Tá, yes, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Declan McAleer appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Kellie Armstrong to select and nominate, please.

Ms Armstrong: We choose the Department of Education and Mr Chris Lyttle to be Chair of that Committee.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Lyttle: Yes, Mr Speaker.

Mr Chris Lyttle appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Speaker: I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Finance Committee, and I nominate Paul Frew as the vice chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Frew: I am, Mr Speaker.

Mr Paul Frew appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.

10.45 am

Mr Speaker: I call on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: We select the vice chair of the Justice Committee and appoint Linda Dillon to that position.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Ms Dillon: I am, a Cheann Comhairle.

Ms Linda Dillon appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

Mr Speaker: I call on Dolores Kelly to select and nominate.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. We select the Department for the Economy and, as vice chair, Sinead McLaughlin.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Ms McLaughlin: I am, Mr Speaker.

Ms Sinead McLaughlin appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.

Mr Speaker: I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Health Committee and nominate Gary Middleton as the vice chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Middleton: I am, Mr Speaker.

Mr Gary Middleton appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health.

Mr Speaker: I call on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: We select the vice chair of the Education Committee and appoint Karen Mullan.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Ms Mullan: Yes, a Cheann Comhairle.

Ms Karen Mullan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Speaker: I call on Robbie Butler to select and nominate.

Mr Butler: We — *[Interruption.]* We select the Executive Office and nominate Mike Nesbitt.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Nesbitt: I am.

Mr Mike Nesbitt appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.

Mr Speaker: I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I choose the Committee for Infrastructure, and I appoint David Hilditch as the vice chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Hilditch: Yes, Mr Speaker.

Mr David Hilditch appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: I call on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: We select the vice chair of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee and appoint Philip McGuigan.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McGuigan: Tá, a Cheann Comhairle. Yes.

Mr Philip McGuigan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr Speaker: I call on Kellie Armstrong to select and nominate.

Ms Armstrong: Mr Speaker, for the final vice chair, the Department for Communities, the Alliance Party's nomination is myself, Kellie Armstrong.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated? *[Laughter.]*

Ms Armstrong: Yes.

Mr Speaker: I sort of thought you would.

Ms Kellie Armstrong appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the appointment of the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Statutory Committees.

Standing Committees: Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons

Mr Speaker: I am required to supervise the appointment of a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to each Standing Committee other than the Business Committee, in accordance with the procedure set out in Standing Order 51. I shall ask the nominating officer for each political party, in the order required by the formula in Standing Order 51(2), to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his or her party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Before we commence, I remind Members of the requirement of Standing Order 56(3) that:

“Neither the chairperson nor deputy chairperson of the committee shall be a member of the same political party as the Minister of Finance or of any junior Minister appointed to the Department of Finance.”

I now call on Mrs Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the party which has the highest figure under the formula laid down in Standing Orders, to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Mrs Foster: I choose the Public Accounts Committee, and I nominate William Humphrey as Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Humphrey: I am, Mr Speaker.

Mr William Humphrey appointed Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Speaker: I call on John O’Dowd to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Mr O’Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We select the Standards and Privileges Committee and appoint Sinéad Ennis.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Ms Ennis: I am, a Cheann Comhairle.

Ms Sinéad Ennis appointed Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr Speaker: I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and nominate Mervyn Storey as Chairperson. I understand that Mr Storey has submitted a letter to the Speaker’s Office, because, unfortunately, he has had a family bereavement and cannot be here today.

Mrs Foster: Thank you, Mrs Foster. I have received correspondence from Mervyn Storey that he is willing to accept the nomination.

Mr Mervyn Storey appointed Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr Speaker: On behalf of the Assembly, I extend our condolences to Mervyn on the death of his father.

I call on John O’Dowd to select and nominate.

Mr O’Dowd: A Cheann Comhairle, we select the Procedures Committee and appoint Carál Ní Chuilín.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Glacaim. I accept, a Cheann Comhairle.

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín appointed Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Mr Speaker: I call on Dolores Kelly to select and nominate.

Mrs D Kelly: We select the Audit Committee and nominate Daniel McCrossan.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McCrossan: I am, Mr Speaker.

Mr Daniel McCrossan appointed Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Steve Aiken to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person for a post.

Dr Aiken: We nominate Roy Beggs to the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Beggs: I am willing to take up the office of vice chair.

Mr Roy Beggs appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Speaker: I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Standards and Privileges Committee, and I nominate William Irwin as vice chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Irwin: I am, Mr Speaker.

Mr William Irwin appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr Speaker: I call on John O’Dowd to select and nominate.

Mr O’Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We select the vice chair of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and appoint Maolíosa McHugh.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McHugh: Glacaim leis sin. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: Maith go leor. Thank you.

Mr Maolíosa McHugh appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr Speaker: I call on Kellie Armstrong to select and nominate.

Ms Armstrong: We choose the Audit Committee and appoint Andrew Muir as vice chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Muir: I am.

Mr Andrew Muir appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Mr Speaker: I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: The Procedures Committee is what is left, and I nominate Tom Buchanan as vice chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr T Buchanan: I am, Mr Speaker.

Mr Thomas Buchanan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

That concludes the appointment of the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Standing Committees.

Standing Order 79(2): Suspension

Mr Butler: I beg to move

That Standing Order 79(2) be suspended for 14 January 2020.

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

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 79(2) be suspended for 14 January 2020.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the Chamber and there are no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Assembly Commission Appointments

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this motion will be treated as a business motion. There will be no debate. I remind Members that Standing Orders require that such a motion be approved with cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79, the following shall be appointed to be Members of the Assembly Commission:

The Speaker (ex officio)

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Mr Robbie Butler

Mrs Pam Cameron

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr John O'Dowd — [Mr Butler.]

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the Chamber and there are no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Election of the Principal Deputy Speaker

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the election of a Principal Deputy Speaker. The process will be conducted in accordance with Standing Order 5A. I will begin by asking for a nomination. Any Member may rise to nominate one of the Deputy Speakers to act as Principal Deputy Speaker. I will then confirm that the person nominated is willing to act as Principal Deputy Speaker, and then a debate relevant to that nomination may take place. The Business Committee has agreed that only one Member should speak on behalf of each party in the debate. They will be allowed up to three minutes each. At the end of the debate, I will put the Question on the nomination. The vote will be on a cross-community basis. Of course, if the proposal is not carried, I shall ask for a further nomination and the process may be repeated.

Do I have a proposal for a Deputy Speaker to be nominated to be Principal Deputy Speaker? Members should rise in their place.

Ms Mallon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Just a few days ago, a number of parties signed up to the New Decade, New Approach agreement and entered the Executive in good faith. That is signalling a new approach through being inclusive and power-sharing. There is no purpose or point to this item other than to confer an elevated title on one of three Deputy Speakers.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Ms Mallon: If I could just very quickly make the point. We are just making the point that we do not support it and that —

Mr Speaker: It is not a point of order. You will have three minutes to speak to the motion. OK? Thank you.

Mr Lyons: I nominate Mr Christopher Stalford to the post of Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Deputy Speaker, do you agree to act as Principal Deputy Speaker?

Mr Stalford: Yes, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Standing Orders provide for a debate to take place on the nomination. Members may speak only once in the debate. Standing Order 5A(7) requires the debate to be relevant to the nomination. I will not allow Members to stray into any other area. Members will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

I call the Member who made the nomination, Gordon Lyons.

Mr Lyons: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. On behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, I am delighted to be able to nominate Mr Christopher Stalford to the position of Principal Deputy Speaker.

I know Christopher, and I have known him for quite a number of years. I know how committed he is to his constituents and to serving in public life, and I have no doubt that, if the House agrees to make him Principal Deputy Speaker, he will serve, and he will serve well, in this place. He does, of course, have previous experience of chairing debates, having served as a Deputy Lord Mayor of Belfast.

Mr Speaker, I know it is not the tradition in the House for the Speaker to wear a wig or robes. That may well change if the Deputy Speaker whom I am nominating has his way.

I say that by way of warning, and I hope that that will not turn off any Members from supporting him. All joking aside, however, we have confidence in his abilities. We have confidence in his impartiality and know that he will provide a good service to the House and the people of Northern Ireland in the role.

11.00 am

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I want to make a point for the benefit of all Members. I address this directly to Mr Colin McGrath. There will be plenty of opportunities in the House for Members who feel aggrieved or who disagree with any ruling by the Speaker to have their say, but I will not tolerate you, Member McGrath, or anybody else coming up to the back of the podium and insulting the Speaker in the middle of a plenary debate. I will not accept that. In future, I will take action. *[Interruption.]* Order. I want Members to take note of that. That is twice in two days that it has happened involving the Member, and that is why I am taking the unusual step of saying that I will not allow such behaviour to continue. *[Interruption.]* Order in the House.

Ms Mallon: A few days ago, a number of parties signed up to the New Decade, New Approach agreement, in the sense that it was the basis on which we were entering the Executive in good faith. It is, we believe, adopting a new way of doing politics, which is one based on inclusivity and genuine power-sharing.

There is no purpose or point to this business other than to confer, as I said earlier, an elevated title on one of three Deputy Speakers, all of whom hold equal roles. It represents, sadly, a continuation of a past decade and a past approach, and we cannot support it.

I want to make the point, however, that this is in no way a reflection on or related to Mr Christopher Stalford, whom our party fully supports and has faith in. It is not the appointment of Mr Stalford that we disagree with but the title that is to be conferred on him.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Armstrong: The Alliance Party has opposed this role each time that it has come up, for the reasons that have already been spelt out. It is an honorary title. Our opposition is no reflection on any of the three Deputy Speakers. We just feel that, in this day and age, it is not right to elevate someone above the other Deputy Speakers when that is not the case. There is no money attached to the position. There is no privilege or prestige to it other than a title. Therefore, the Alliance Party will be opposing any nominations.

Mr Allister: As has been said correctly, this is a non-post. It is surely a post for vanity purposes to emphasise the carve-up between the two main parties.

I remind Members that the post was specially created in 2011 not because of need or because of any compulsion to help the running of the House but as a sop to Sinn Féin and to give someone a title. Of course, some from the Sinn Féin Benches in a former life enjoyed titles and are perhaps finding it difficult to live without them. We therefore created the preposterous post of Principal Deputy Speaker, as if inserting the word "Principal" bestowed any powers over and above those that exist for any Deputy Speaker. The Principal Deputy Speaker has

no powers, no rights, no authority and no standing above any other Deputy Speaker, so why do we have the title? It is a title that is a nonsense in itself and is but, as I said, a perpetuation of the carve-up in this House.

Mr Stalford, I am sure, will carry off the role with great aplomb. It may not have been the title that he was hoping for, as he may have been hoping for that of junior Minister in the Executive Office. However, the crumbs are better, he may think, than nothing, although I would tell him that "nothing" is a very good place to be in this House.

Mr Givan: May I just say that this position is akin to a similar position that exists in Westminster? It is not unusual for there to be a distinguishing feature among the Deputy Speakers there, so this is not something that should cause any concern, particularly to unionists in the House.

In respect of the nomination of Christopher Stalford, he and I go back many years, to the Young Democrats of the Democratic Unionist Party. I first met him when I was 15. We sat together in a school debate in Belfast City Hall, Mr Speaker — a place that you will have been familiar with. I am not sure whether you chaired those proceedings. At that point, Christopher and I ended up sitting beside each other, and we had a very successful tag team debating event. I am sure that the behaviour that Christopher demonstrated there will not be repeated as Principal Deputy Speaker and that he will be on his best behaviour in the House. I have no doubt that Christopher will be able to carry out the role in the distinguished fashion that he is accustomed to. I know that he is also mindful of his roots as a working-class unionist who is pleased to be able to take up this position in the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the debate as there are no other Members indicating that they wish to speak. I remind the Assembly that cross-community support is required.

Question put, That Mr Christopher Stalford be Principal Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

The Assembly divided.

Mr Speaker: OK, Members. I apologise: we are still having technical difficulties with the IT system, so we will defer the result of the Vote until later in the business this morning.

Ministerial Statements

School Enhancement Programme

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): While we wait with bated breath for the result of the very close contest that we have just taken part in, I would like to make a statement updating the Assembly on my capital investment plans under the second call to the school enhancement programme, also known as “SEP2”.

By way of background, the school enhancement programme was first announced in June 2012. The programme makes funding of between £500,000 and £4 million available for projects aimed at refurbishing or extending existing school provision. Particularly for Members who may be unfamiliar with the project, I make it clear that that is not a new school build; it is refurbishing or extending existing school provision. The first call to SEP was launched in January 2013 and resulted in projects in 50 schools being announced to advance in planning. Forty-seven of those projects are either now complete or close to completion, with two currently on site. One project is on hold, pending a decision on a major works project funded under the Fresh Start Agreement for shared and integrated education.

Given the success of SEP1, on 25 January 2017, I made a written statement to the Assembly on my proposal to make a second call for applications under the programme. By the closing date of 28 February 2017, a total of 165 applications had been received under the call. Those applications were then assessed under the agreed protocol, and separate priority lists were created for primary, post-primary and special schools. To ensure that a pipeline of SEP projects was maintained in the absence of Ministers, the Department’s permanent secretary made an announcement in May 2018 of 25 projects from the prioritised lists to advance in planning. Those projects have an estimated investment of £60 million. A further 16 schools, with an enhanced investment of £40 million, were announced by the permanent secretary in January 2019.

11.30 am

Today, I am pleased to announce a further 18 schools that will advance in planning under the school enhancement programme. Twelve are primary schools; five are post-primary schools; and there is one special school that will benefit from an estimated capital investment of about £45 million. The 12 primary schools to advance in planning are as follows: Botanic Primary School in Belfast; Carrick Primary School in Lurgan; Cliftonville Controlled Integrated Primary School in Belfast; Glenraig Controlled Integrated Primary School, close to Holywood; Holy Child Primary School in Londonderry; Irvinestown Primary School; Kilcooley Primary School; Killinchy Primary School; St John the Baptist Primary School in Belfast; St Kieran’s Primary School, Dunmurry; St Paul’s Primary School in Mica Drive, Belfast; and Strabane Primary School. The five post-primary schools are Glaslough College, Ballyhalbert; St Louis Grammar School, Ballymena; St Patrick’s College, Maghera; Sullivan Upper School, Holywood; and Victoria College, Belfast. The eighteenth school that will receive investment is Riverside special school, which is in Antrim.

This is a significant investment that will deliver much-needed capital investment in the schools estate via the

school enhancement programme. Improving the schools estate is a priority for me, and the SEP has been an excellent way of delivering capital works projects that have an immediate, positive impact on the schools and pupils. Today’s announcement is not just good news for the schools themselves but represents a welcome boost to the economy, especially the construction industry.

In addition to this SEP announcement, I continue to advance the programme of major capital builds, as well as a programme of much-needed minor works across the estate. I will also look to invest in maintenance works across all schools to ensure schools are fit for purpose and enable effective teaching and learning for the benefit of all our children and young people.

Mr Lyttle: It is a privilege to serve as Chairperson of the Education Committee. I look forward to working with Committee colleagues and the Minister to ensure we deliver better education for all in our community.

There are obviously many serious challenges facing education to which we must respond decisively. Capital investment is urgently needed by many schools in Northern Ireland, and, whilst the announcement is welcome news for a small number of schools, radical investment and reform is needed to ensure that all our school facilities are fit for purpose. How and when will the Minister establish the root-and-branch independent review of education envisaged by the new deal proposals in order to deliver a reformed, integrated and sustainably resourced education system for all?

Mr Weir: First of all, I congratulate the Member on his appointment as Chair of the Education Committee. I know, from the previous mandate when he worked as vice chair, of his particular passion and involvement in and knowledge of education. I look forward to working with him, the vice chair and, indeed, all the members of the Education Committee when they are appointed. He is right that the announcement today, even on the capital side, is one piece of the jigsaw. It is important to say that, as we move ahead, there will be a mixture of announcements — some dealing with minor works; some potentially with other SEP announcements — and major capital works. It is important that, as we move ahead, that is part of an overall coordinated position on and picture of how we will deliver, in particular, the schools estate for education.

He mentioned the need for reform, and I concur with him. It is undoubtedly the case that, while, for any incoming Minister, there are major resource challenges out there, there is also a strong need to ensure that we get the best possible delivery for all our children. It is also an issue of transformation and reform, and I think that anyone believing that it is simply one or the other —. I am committed to the new document in terms of the delivery of the project of how we globally, if you like, reform education, and I hope to bring proposals soon to the Assembly in connection with that.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Minister for his statement and the additional investment that will go into schools in my constituency, particularly Botanic Primary School and Victoria College.

It is the ambition of us all, or at least it should be, that we have a schools estate that is fit for the education of our children.

On the theme of all politics being local, I ask the Minister to indicate that he is prepared to visit Nettlefield Primary School off the Woodstock Road to see for himself the need for capital investment in order to improve its facilities.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his comments. I do not have great foresight, but I suspect, particularly when we are dealing with a school enhancement programme and, indeed, capital build for schools, that there may be a theme running through a number of the questions that contains a certain level of local interest. It is good that MLAs have that local interest. I will consider and try to accommodate as many invitations as possible. I do not want to give a specific commitment to an individual invitation, but I will certainly be trying to get out and about as much as possible, because I think it is important that any Minister, particularly an Education Minister, does so.

Across the system, there is a need for capital investment. We need to ensure that no child who goes through the gates of a school is disadvantaged because of the school's physical fabric or its lack of facilities. That means that, with any investment programme, any money has to be made available in a robust and impartial way. As part of that, I am willing and more than happy to visit a range of schools across Northern Ireland.

Ms Mullan: First, I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I look forward to working alongside him and other members of the Committee on progressing the work that we have been doing all along.

I welcome today's announcement of much-needed capital investment, particularly for Holy Child Primary School in Creggan in Derry, a school in my constituency that is over 60 years old and in much need of improved accommodation.

Given the crisis in the education budget, is it the Minister's intention to advance the programme of major capital builds and other works across the schools estate?

Mr Weir: First, I congratulate the Member on her appointment to vice chair. I know the work that she has put in over the past few years as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on education, and I look forward to her continuing that work through the formal structures of the Committee.

Yes, it is undoubtedly the case that this is part of a wider picture and a wider jigsaw of need for capital investment. The Member refers to the financial pressures in education. That is undoubtedly the case, and we will be working with Executive colleagues on a range of financial pressures that needs to be dealt with.

There is a little bit more positive news on the capital side. We will be looking to advance major capital works as well. It is important that there be a flow of works that can lead to a level of improvement. I am sure that various Members will have particular schools in mind from their own constituency, but it is undoubtedly always the case that, although a considerable amount will be spent on school improvement through a range of projects, if more money is available, more money can be spent. To that extent, we are also trying to deal with a certain backlog of maintenance work, as well as a need to try to provide the best possible facilities for all our pupils.

Mr McGrath: I congratulate Minister Weir on his appointment. It will provide a certain amount of continuity, and I look forward to discussing important issues, such

as special educational needs and youth services, in the period ahead.

In the context of today's announcement, there is sometimes a bit of concern that the time between the announcement and the shovel going into the ground can be too long. Can the Minister give us some assurances about the work that he will undertake to ensure that these projects are delivered in a timely manner?

Mr Weir: The Member has become the Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office. I hope that TEO's gain does not become Education's loss. Although it is obviously not my place to appoint members to the Education Committee, I value the experience that the Member brought to the issues as the SDLP education spokesperson.

The school enhancement programme is now a well-trialled and well-worked scheme. It can be the case with any capital build, whether schools, hospitals or a range of other things, that, if you are looking at a major capital programme involving new works, there can be a very long delay between announcement and completion. The one advantage of the school enhancement programme is that it is on a scale of between half a million pounds and £4 million, and it is, effectively, work on-site. One of the processes with new capital build is going through a site search to make sure that you are getting best value for public money and, indeed, finding the most appropriate place. These works will, essentially, be on-site and, therefore, the time between announcement and completion will be shorter than for a major capital announcement.

I mentioned that 47 of 50 in the initial tranche are more or less complete. For all of us, I am sure that there is always a frustration about how quickly these things are turned around. Certainly, we will make sure that this happens as soon as is practicable for each of those schools.

Mrs Barton: Mr Weir, I also congratulate you on your appointment as Minister of Education.

I welcome this school enhancement programme, which adds 18 extra schools to the list, and the capital investment of £45 million in them. Particularly, I am pleased to see Irvinstown Primary School in Fermanagh/South Tyrone on the list. That should give it a boost. However, can the Minister confirm that the money is available immediately and ring-fenced for this purpose?

Mr Weir: Do not forget the expenditure. First, without this sounding a little like a love-in of former education spokespersons — I think you are the fourth party education spokesperson to speak — I look forward to working with you.

The money is available, and because it is a capital build, there is a flow of projects. The Department is confident that the money is there. Most of it will not be spent immediately. Probably, it will not occur within this financial year. Unless there is some radical change of direction from the Executive to suddenly cut all programmes, there is confidence that that money is there. It is not dependent upon additional resources from, for example, the British Government, and there is a long tradition on a number of calls with SEPs, so people can take it that the announcement means that works at these 18 schools will happen.

Miss McIlveen: From the outset, I would like to declare that I am a governor of Killinchy Primary school, and I have met the Education Authority on a number of important issues in relation to it. I am delighted that Killinchy Primary School and Glastry College will benefit from the Minister's announcement.

Is the Minister in a position to give details of the anticipated work to be carried out, the amount of money to be allocated and the likely delivery timescales for both schools?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member. I know she has been very proactive in pressing the case for Killinchy Primary in particular.

I will highlight a couple of things. First, the money available in each case will be up to £4 million. It is probably likely to be in the region of £3 million to £4 million each. On the detail of what will happen, it is important, because I suspect that this will be raised by a number of Members, to say that the next steps in the process will be that work will go on between the Department and the individual schools to work up the project. All 18 schools have been approved, and all will receive their SEP. The specific detail of what schools get might alter as a result of those discussions. On some occasions in the past, that has been additionally positive. Sometimes, it can be the substitution of what is being provided: it might be found, for example, that a school's actual priority is ensuring that it has safe wiring or something of that nature. It can also be the case that, if it is then found that, within the envelope of money available, the project can be delivered at a lower rate, some additional money could become available.

11.45 am

On the specifics of the two bits, the remarks I made about what is proposed reflect what the schools asked for and not necessarily what the end result will be. Glastry College, I think, has highlighted an issue of additional accommodation to bring it up to the schedule of accommodation — for example, a number of units in the school are undersized, and there is a lack of a sports hall. That will form part of the discussions, particularly as regards Glastry. For Killinchy, again, there are accommodation issues and size issues, and I know that there has been a particular issue around traffic management, which, I think, will be a priority as well. Those issues reflect the asks of the school, and there will then be an iteration of discussion around those projects with the individual schools. That is an important caveat to make clear to people. In fact, however, it will mean that all these schools will receive a school enhancement programme.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his statement, and, in particular, I welcome his inclusion of Irvinestown Primary School in the school enhancement project. Will he ensure that the next stage is delivered as soon as possible?

Mr Weir: There will be no delay in relation to that. It is fair to say that good work has always been done by the Department on the SEP. I appreciate that former Minister O'Dowd originally announced it. As part of that, there has been a good working relationship between schools, contractors and the Department in helping to deliver the programme. Certainly, there will be no undue delays.

As I said, because of some of the restrictions that do not apply to the school enhancement programme, as opposed

to a much larger capital build, which might involve a £20 million or £30 million project, schools are not simply refurbished or provided with new classrooms overnight, but, in terms of timescales, it is a lot better than other capital projects. Certainly, there will not be any level of delay.

Mr Dunne: I, too, congratulate Minister Weir on his re-election. I am delighted that he has included three schools in the North Down area, and I congratulate him on remembering his roots and where he came from. No doubt, it probably did not influence his decision.

Will the Minister indicate how we justify the school enhancement programme against a new build for specific buildings? Is the public getting value for money, or is this just a short-term exercise that puts off the dreaded day when we need new buildings in a lot of areas rather than just a short-term fix?

Mr Weir: It is a cocktail of capital projects. It is important that, in terms of the capital money that is available, we ensure that there is a steady spend of that money to deliver for people. As such, it does, I believe, deliver value for money. If we were in a situation where, for example, school enhancement programmes were simply in place of there ever being any major capital builds, that would be the wrong approach. Similarly, if we simply concentrated on new capital builds, we would have a limited number of projects, and this is an opportunity to deliver that.

It is also the case, I am sure, that even some of the schools that applied would, in an ideal world, like an entirely new capital build. It is also the case that, on a case-by-case basis, not all schools will require a new capital build. Sometimes, it is also the case that it is less about the fabric of the existing building but may well be a lack of particular facilities. It may mean that, while the school building itself is very good, there may be a lack of a sports hall or, while provision of subject matters in, say, English and history may be fine, the science lab may need to be looked at.

Ms Sheerin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Comhghairdeas leat i do ról nua. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I congratulate you on your new role. I also want to thank the Minister and congratulate him on his new role.

Like others around the Chamber, I welcome the statement, particularly in relation to St Pat's College in Maghera, which is in my constituency of Mid Ulster. My party has met Mrs Mussen and the team there on several occasions, and I can attest to the urgent need for that capital investment. On her behalf, I ask the Minister if he could provide an indication of the timescale for the project and when work is likely to begin.

Mr Weir: On that project, first of all, I seem to remember that, in my previous post, I had the opportunity to visit St Pat's, although there are that many schools that I have either visited or not visited — I am sure that former Ministers can also refer to this — that I am trying to work out whether there is a slight false memory about that.

Across the board, I cannot give specific commitments on individual timescales, but the intention is that the work will begin in 2022-23. The general rule of thumb for the school enhancement programme is that it would be about an 18-month project, so the idea is that they could be completed within that period. Whereas, with major capital

builds, even when they are announced, it is sometimes five or even close to 10 years before there is completion, with these there can be much greater turnaround. We aim to have these completed in 2024-25, so we are still talking about a few years away. The timescale will be on a moving scale, but we hope to get them progressed as quickly as possible.

Mrs D Kelly: I join others in congratulating Minister Weir on his appointment as Education Minister. I welcome the inclusion of Carrick Primary School, which is in my constituency. The Minister may know that, whilst it is not a fully formally integrated school, it has a school population that broadly reflects the wider community in which it is geographically placed, and that is very welcome.

Minister, in your statement, you refer to investment in maintenance works, both capital and minor: have you, even at this early stage, any sense of how much that might be? Would you give any thought to looking at the process by which school principals can requisition some minor works, which does seem to be unduly cumbersome, bureaucratic and costly?

Mr Weir: Broadly speaking, the overall capital investment will be, as I said, a mix of new build, maintenance and SEP. There is still some thought and decisions to be taken about the precise nature of that mix.

The Member makes a good point about issues around autonomy, particularly in procurement. That is one of the areas that we will want to look at, to ensure that there is always a balance between trying to get the maximum value for public money and, by the same token, ensuring that we do not micromanage. I think that there is a strong case. It is also the case, looking ahead on that issue, that it is about giving people opportunities for levels of autonomy. Previously, when I was Minister, we put out a fairly open questionnaire to schools on the issue of autonomy. Even from schools in very similar positions, there is sometimes a very mixed opinion. Some schools take the view that they do not want any additional burden, and they effectively want somebody else to sort it out for them, whereas other schools are much keener to embrace it. It is about trying to work out a system whereby we can give, within the context of, as I said, value for money, that level of opportunity for autonomy in a sensible way. That clearly involves levels of procurement and maintenance.

Mr Beggs: I, too, congratulate the Minister on his appointment and wish him well.

There are huge pressures on school budgets. That is particularly the case where there have been school amalgamations and schools continue to operate on multiple sites. In the Minister's statement, he indicated that some 59 schools, over a three-year period, had benefited from £145 million. Will the Minister advise how that, along with the new build programme, prioritises and encourages school amalgamations, which can bring about improvements to educational outcomes for our children and young people as well as savings for the Department? At the same time, Minister, can you give an update on the progress in the redevelopment of Islandmagee Primary School, which has already taken over a decade?

Mr Weir: First, on the last point, obviously, I do not have direct details here in connection with Islandmagee, but I will be happy to write to the Member on that. I do not know whether he was briefly excited when he saw the

announcement because there is reference to "Carrick Primary School"; of course, that is the one in Lurgan, not in the Member's constituency.

The Member makes a good point about the broader rationalisation of the schools estate and, indeed, where we have, for instance, mergers, and we will look at that in connection with the transformation side of it. Often, a merger can lead to a better longer-term solution, but Members will also be aware that, often, particularly where there is a split site, mergers can create a lot of upfront costs, so we need to look from a transformation point of view, particularly, in connection with that.

With regard to it playing a role within the decision-making process, mention was made of the fact that these were decided on the existing protocol. A range of priorities are built into that protocol. Amongst those will be the enhancement works that are essential to effect rationalisation projects, so it is, if you like, part of a wider area plan. Where there are, for instance, split sites, ensuring that things can actually be brought together can also be part of that. We are looking at where there are unmet needs and significant substandard accommodation.

What we need to ensure — I think that this has been happening in the Department — is that, as we move ahead in area planning, for instance, particularly on major capital works, we have an alignment and that it is, if you like, in step with the wider position of trying to ensure that we get the best overall layout of schools as part of the overall position.

Mr Clarke: Like others, I welcome the Minister to his appointment and welcome his statement. He mentioned the additional 18 schools under the school enhancement programme. Obviously, I welcome the investment in Riverside, which I had the opportunity to visit in June last year. Much investment is required there. I appreciate, Minister, that your statement today was relatively short and that you, possibly, will not have the detail with you, but will you write to me with further detail on what Riverside is to receive? Given that it is a special school, it is in a difficult and cramped location. Will the Minister get us more detail on that?

When I am on my feet, I take the opportunity, as others have done, to be parochial and discuss Crumlin Integrated. I extend an invitation to the Minister to Crumlin. It has come under difficulty from the Education Authority. Currently, over a thousand pupils leave Crumlin daily to go to other schools, but we would like to see the long-term viability of Crumlin sustained.

Mr Weir: First, I am happy to correspond with the Member about Riverside. I am happy to try to accommodate other invitations, but I fear that we may have to speak to the people who have the technology to clone Dolly the sheep, because I may need to be in several places at the same time for school visits. However, we will certainly take every offer and try to accommodate as many school visits as possible. I appreciate that a range of schools put in for the school enhancement programme and others did not. There will be opportunities for other schools as part of that.

Ms Ennis: I, too, welcome the announcement today of funding for the schools that have been listed, but it would be remiss of me and it would be conspicuous by its absence, if I failed to mention one school in particular in my South Down constituency: St Louis Grammar School in Kilkeel. It is in dire need of major capital investment. I

extend an invitation to the Minister to pay a visit to St Louis to see the situation at the campus.

In his statement, the Minister alludes to the fact that he intends to continue the advancement of major capital builds. When will he announce the next tranche of funding for capital projects so that schools such as St Louis' in Killeel, in lower Mourne, can get their business case in order and avail themselves of the next tranche of funding?

Mr Weir: From that point of view, there are a couple of issues there. As I mentioned, I think, possibly 165 schools initially put in, so we have seen tranches happening. First, I think that the current prioritised list is due to expire in May, but I will consider whether there should be a further tranche of SEPs announced by then or whether we should look to a new call as part of that. Mention was also made of major capital works. I hope to make an announcement on the potential prioritisation of projects for major capital works in the coming months.

12.00 noon

It is also the case that, because we have these categories — and the way they are subcategorised — there is a ceiling of £4 million on an SEP. Clearly, if there is a major new build that would be above that, it may be that a school may feel that it is not appropriate to put in a bid for that particular bit; they may look simply towards capital. So it is a certain amount of horses for courses on that basis, although there is also the case that the school could put in for a school enhancement programme and apply for major capital works.

All those projects will be assessed, and we hope that, within the coming months, we can actually move on major capital projects. It will be a completely open process where people can apply on that basis.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, can I just remind Members that there are quite a number of Members due to speak and requesting to speak, and we will not get through them at this rate. I am just letting Members know that they should try to keep their remarks as brief as they possibly can.

Ms Armstrong: I will try to be brief. I thank the Minister very much for telling the public that we actually have money that can be spent on our schools that are in crisis. I welcome him, of course, back into his ministry. I am delighted that a number of schools in our constituency, such as Killinchy and Glastry, are included. Much-needed work needs to be done there.

The Minister talks about the immediate impact, and I know it could take a bit of time for this to happen, but we need to think also towards the long-term delivery of investment. All this needs to be fed into the root-and-branch review of education that we have agreed on in the new deal document. How will the Minister ensure that that is fed through? How many schools that have already applied and have been awarded money — probably under the permanent secretary — are yet to receive funding? Will he, at some stage, publish the funding that each school receives?

Mr Weir: Taking each of those in turn: in the wider picture, any examination of reform will have to be of a holistic nature. There is no point in different aspects of that going down a silo route. Consequently, while a lot of this will

probably focus on educational structures and resource finances, the capital has got to marry in with that.

On the state of play of the existing schools, it referred to the earlier provision, and I am sure that an update can be provided on each of the individual schools in the earlier tranches. If we can produce that, we will lay it in the Assembly Library.

For the individual amounts, we are still at the stage where, in the detail of that, a certain amount of work will go on, because, again, part of that will be ongoing discussion about the projects with the schools. I am conscious of the fact that if we said, "Here is a very definitive amount for each school", that may end up giving a false impression. It may underestimate, sometimes, what money there would be. The only that I will say for absolute certainty is that all school enhancement projects will be between half a million and £4 million. As Members can suggest, the fact that we were talking about a tranche of money of £45 million across 18 schools means it will tend to be on the higher side of that in general. Obviously, as individual details become available and agreed, that will then become transparent between the Department and the schools.

Dr Archibald: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like others, I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I also welcome today's announcement. In relation to an answer to a previous question about new tranches of funding for capital programmes: schools in need of major capital investment might be inclined, and understandably so, to apply under the school enhancement programme. Would that have any impact on an application for major capital works?

Mr Weir: In that situation, no school is barred from applying for both. Indeed, even if there is a school enhancement programme, it does not automatically rule them out. Obviously, in broader capital works, there are a range of factors that are built in to any protocol, one of which is the physical state of the buildings and the facilities that are there. So, I suppose, to some extent, there is always some impact because it may mean that a scoring mechanism, for instance, on the physical state of any — I am just checking that that is correct. Maybe not. Just give me a moment here. There will be a —. Sorry.

There is, ultimately, a situation that, if a school has been approved for an SEP, it is likely to lead to a period of time in which it would not be eligible. The normal rule of thumb is that there is a seven-year period for that, and, again, in the wider context, people will look at it. As I said, that is not to say that schools cannot apply for both, but clearly, if they are successful, there will be a certain time when schools have to take a little bit of a strategic decision themselves about what they feel to be best. Sometimes that will be obvious, because a school may not be necessarily looking for a complete new build. It may say, "Well, actually, we need additional classrooms", because one of the other drawbacks for a school — sometimes this can be an advantage — if it is looking for a complete capital build is that there will be a site search, so it may not necessarily end up where it is at present. The SEPs give an assurance that the work can carry on and, indeed, that the school will remain at its current location, which also gives some certainty for the way ahead.

Mr Catney: Minister, like everyone else here, I wish you the best of luck in your portfolio as the Education Minister and every success in that going forward.

I thank the officials that have met with me over the one school that was here today, St John the Baptist. It borders on my constituency, but I was asked by parents to meet the board of governors and the school. I am delighted that this is now being put forward as a school enhancement project. Little St John the Baptist has had half its school closed. Minister, I do not want to infringe on your time, but, if at all possible, you will see what that will do and how it will transform that whole area. With that school being closed down, the vandalism and the children trying to go there, in the enveloping of that school, can you and your officials try to keep to a minimum the length of time and the disruption?

Mr Weir: First of all, I pay tribute to the Member. I know that he has been particularly assiduous in raising the case of St John the Baptist, and I credit him with doing a lot of work with the school. I also highlight, given the appointment of the new principal of St John the Baptist, that we have not given this just to get a favourable response from a social media commentator. I hope, like the original St John the Baptist, this is a forerunner of better things.

I am sure the Member will be assiduous in ensuring that the envelope is pushed out as much as possible in connection with this. Again, the aim is to try to deliver these as quickly as we possibly can. On that basis, there will be no undue delay, but, obviously, we want to have, from the Department's point of view, a clear discussion with the school on the exact details of what will be provided.

Ms Flynn: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, and I also send my congratulations to Mr Weir on his appointment as Minister of Education. I welcome the statement from the Minister today, particularly in relation to the investment that is coming into St Kieran's and St John the Baptist schools in West Belfast. I also thank the Speaker, as I know he was involved in some of that work with St John the Baptist School locally. Can the Minister please outline when the work on these two schools will commence?

Mr Weir: As indicated, we have an overall timescale. We do not have the detail, because some of that will involve the wider discussions. We are hoping that, with the school enhancement programme, people will be on-site in '22-'23 and that, indeed, there will be the normal timescale, which is roughly about 18 months. There can be a fairly quick turnaround with SEP construction. One of the advantages is that — this again depends on the exact nature of the work that is being done — in the vast majority of cases, it should mean that there will not be any particular levels of dislocation. I cannot give a guarantee of that for every school. There may need to be some temporary relocation, but the fact that it is on-site and will be part of the school should mean that we can minimise the level of disruption for any of the schools. Again, I look forward to new facilities both at St John's and St Kieran's.

I look forward to the refreshing sound of Members welcoming the inclusion of a school that is outside their constituency. Pat Catney, to be fair to him, a Member for Lagan Valley, did break the taboo and welcomed the inclusion of a school in West Belfast, so he should perhaps get a special Speaker's prize. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: I will consider that in due course.

Mr Nesbitt: I join the chorus of congratulations to Mr Weir on his reappointment as Minister. He has given some detail of the plan for Glastry College, the likely timescales, and the correlation between receiving school enhancement programme money and being granted money for a new build. On that basis, is Glastry College still in line for a new build? I declare an interest as chair of the board of Movilla High School. Does the announcement have any implications for area planning in Ards and North Down?

Mr Weir: First, I have highlighted the timescale. I am not making any particular assumptions about the two schools that have been mentioned. What I have highlighted about the details of the project is based on what the school put in its application and what the asks were. In most cases, that will then be reflected precisely in the school enhancement programme, based as it is on the school's needs. As has been mentioned, in the normal process of the school enhancement programme, there may be a bar on a successful application for a new build, but we will want to look at everything in the wider context of area planning.

Similarly, the wider context of area planning will need to be looked at for Movilla High School. We will come back to that at a later stage. If a development proposal comes forward, there will need to be reassessment to ensure that it is fit for purpose. Sometimes, as I said, what a school says it wants may not necessarily be the absolute priority when it comes to what it needs. Sometimes, when a project is under way, it can even be found that priorities change a little bit.

Ms Ni Chuilín: I, too, congratulate the Minister of Education. I congratulate him on the investment in Cliftonville Integrated Primary School in North Belfast. It is very much welcomed.

The Minister mentioned procurement earlier in his answer to, I think, Dolores Kelly. I would like procurement procedures to be strengthened so that it is not the case that, if schools go down the CPD route, more money is spent doing minor works and replacing fixtures than would be if that work had been done independently. Significant money is being invested, so I ask the Minister, along with CPD, SIB and others, to bring forward enhanced procedures. That money is welcome. However, procurement certainly needs to be tightened up and to be more cost-effective and inclusive of social clauses and social benefits.

Mr Weir: I take the point that the Member makes. The wider issue of procurement lies largely outside my Department's remit. CPD largely sits in the Department of Finance. We have to be careful that we do not talk at cross purposes. For any major procurement, there have to be clear-cut regulations and procedures. Where there can be a level of annoyance and where we need to look at this from the schools' point of view is where something they see as being a very minor issue has, at times, a long lead-in time, potentially creating a situation in which relatively minor work seems to cost a large amount of money. It is about getting that balance at the lower level. If we are looking at major areas of procurement, it should be universal throughout government to try to ensure a level playing field.

Ms Bradshaw: I echo the congratulations to Mr Weir on his appointment. I also congratulate my colleague Chris

Lyttle, who has taken over as Chair of the Committee for Education.

I was delighted to see Botanic Primary School and Victoria College included on the list. I am very conscious that Victoria College is one of a large number of post-primary schools in my constituency that has the capacity, if given additional funding for such works, to take on more pupils.

In the last academic year, 200 pupils were not allocated their first choice, and, at the end of the day, seven were not allocated a place at all.

You mentioned the protocol and its principal criteria for amalgamation and split sites: I just wonder whether you are minded to change the protocol to reflect where there are pressures, such as I have outlined, to allow for more pupils to be taken on.

12.15 pm

Mr Weir: As regards the protocol mentioned, in terms of split sites, the fact that Victoria College operates on a split site was one of the factors that was a determinant in reaching that decision. If it helps to create, if you like, a more sustainable school estate, that is preferable.

As we look at the broader area of school numbers, we need to ensure that we get the right processes there, particularly for development proposals. The Member may appreciate that I cannot comment on an individual case, but, more generally, we have to ensure that the development proposals are fit for purpose, and, sometimes, that means that we look at things to see where there can be some easier wins. In some cases, there has been a converse situation — I know that the Department has been proactive on this — where schools have an artificial enrolment number that does not reflect the real situation. It was maybe a decision taken in the 70s or 80s. So, there has been an accommodation through downsizing. Clearly, with any individual proposal, we will look at the overall system. That has to feed in, and it will also be part of the wider review. How we manage that and the processes will play into area planning.

Obviously, I am under a legal duty to determine each individual application on its merits, so I will not comment on the individual case, and I assume that the Member will not expect me to anyway.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome you to your new role, and I welcome the Minister back into his role. First, Minister, may I thank you for a job that you did three years ago, just prior to the collapse of the institutions, at Cloughcor school? You kindly accepted my request to visit. Those works have taken place, so I would like to put on record my thanks to you. I also put on record my appreciation to Derek Baker, who has done a tremendous job in a very challenging situation over the last few years in the Department of Education.

Many points have been made about moneys awarded to schools. Mine is focused on a former school of mine: Strabane Primary School. I attended it 20 short years ago, and, since then, it has not changed very much. It was in line for a new school, and I know that there was hope that that would be the case. Will that still be the case, dependent on the level of funding given to the school, or will this simply replace that original proposal?

Also, just before I finish, a former principal of Strabane Primary School retired this year. Mr David Canning gave 38 years of his life to the children in Strabane, and he was principal of that school for 26 years, so I put on record my appreciation to him as well.

Mr Weir: I echo a couple of points that the Member has made. First, it is right that we pay tribute to some of our retiring teachers and principals, many of whom have spent, perhaps, decades at particular schools and seen generations of children go through them. Without getting into any recriminations about the last three years, it would remiss of me not to say that, despite the limitations that have been placed on officials, a lot of good work has been put in by officials in all Departments to ensure that as much progress has been made as possible.

I, too, remember the visit to West Tyrone. It was a bit of a Storm Brendan-type situation. I remember we almost had to borrow the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party's submarine to get back that day, so heavy was the rain on that occasion.

As indicated, if there has been a successful SEP, the general rule is that it will prevent a complete new build for a period; however, there can be the opportunity to obtain that via the other route. Obviously, in Strabane's case, a lot of the focus will be on issues around new classrooms and, indeed, the extension of that. Hopefully, I will be back in the Member's constituency visiting schools in drier circumstances.

Mr Lynch: I welcome the Minister's statement and wish him well in the post. I am somewhat disappointed that there are no Gaelscoileanna on the list. It may be that none applied. I understand that there will be other opportunities for schools to apply, and I hope that the Minister will be inclusive of all sectors, including the Irish language sector.

Mr Weir: From that point of view, I do not know. All indications were, I think, that 165 schools applied. As others can bear out, it is undoubtedly the case that, if you were to visit schools around the country, you would find that a lot more schools would feel that they would benefit from either a new build or an SEP. In some cases, the decision will have been taken by the school as to which route they see as the more appropriate. The criteria are entirely objective, and schools are scored around those criteria and then, if you like, ranked according to the list. The only subdivision is not between any form of sectors but to getting a mix of primary and post-primary and having some indication of special needs schools. Quite frankly, irrespective of the sector that any school applies from, they are scored entirely by officials and entirely on the basis of those objective criteria. That will continue to be the case.

Mr McGuigan: I congratulate you on your appointment as Minister of Education. I alert you to the fact that I have sent you an email requesting an urgent meeting about the proposed closure of Barnish Primary School in my constituency, and I hope that you look on that request favourably.

I welcome your statement and the investment of £45 million in our schools estate. In particular, I welcome the investment in St Louis Grammar School in Ballymena in my constituency. I was checking over and saw that I had had a meeting with the permanent secretary and

departmental officials at the beginning of 2018 about the much-needed work at St Louis. The school is in much need of a new canteen and outdoor sports facilities and repairs to windows and doors throughout the school. Will the Minister confirm that this is the work that will be allocated to St Louis? Will he confirm when the school will get the full allocation of the money given to it?

Mr Weir: As indicated, as with all the proposals, there is an overall timescale for the SEP, so I cannot go into details on an individual school. That will slightly vary, depending on the discussions. The requests were highlighted in a similar manner to how the Member asked about them: the canteen, some replacements of windows, security and sports facilities. Those are the requests, and we will work with them on that. I appreciate the work that the Member has done, and I am slightly reminded of the phrase, "Victory has a thousand parents, and defeat is an orphan". A lot of good work has been put in by a range of Members across the spectrum.

Specifically, on the potential school closure mentioned by the Member, I will take advice, as I do not know what stage that is at. The Member will appreciate that, legally, there are periods where a Minister, with a development proposal, can meet to listen to submissions and hear advice. Because the Minister — in the absence of a Minister, the Department — will take a final decision, they cannot particularly comment on that. There will also be a period in which the Minister is prevented from having that meeting, so I will need to look at that individual case, depending on where it is in the process.

Mr McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate you on your elevation to the post of Speaker. I also congratulate the Minister on his reappointment to the post, and I look forward to a meeting at the earliest possible convenience to discuss some concerns that I have.

The statement is welcome, especially where it mentions St Paul's Primary School in Mica Drive. In its own way, it is a unique school, with over 25% of the pupils coming from the rich cultural and ethnic backgrounds that exist in the area. That enhances everybody's education in the area. I know that the Minister is being pressed to give timelines and dates, but is it possible that he could ask someone in the Department to correspond with me on a timeline for work to begin on that school?

Mr Weir: Obviously, we will respond, and I thank the Member for his question. He will know about the constraints of finance as a former member of the old Finance Committee. In terms of the initial level of correspondence, the direct contact will be between the Department and the schools. I think that there is a need to keep the wider community involved with that. I had the opportunity, I remember, to visit St Paul's. It is, as the Member said, a particularly significant mix of people, which, I think, works very well in the school. As part of that, we want to make sure that the scheme at St Paul's and others can progress as soon as possible. Obviously, we will be able to respond to any correspondence that the Member gives us.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. First of all, I congratulate the Minister on his appointment to the Department. I have

no doubt that he will perform his duties as assiduously as before.

I have been in regular contact with St Patrick's College, Maghera. I have had visits, and I commend the Minister's officials, who took the time to meet the school principal, the chair of the board of governors and Councillor Martin Kearney on site to see the actualities of the school, so please convey that thanks to the officials for their time and commitment, Minister.

We have heard some degree of detail around the commencement date, but — perhaps you would wish to write to me about this, Minister — could you provide me with details of the works that have now been approved for it and the level of financial commitment to those works as well, please?

Mr Weir: I am certainly happy to correspond with the Member. As indicated earlier, this is, if you like, stage 1; it is the approval bit. The next stage is the scoping out of the project between the Department and the school. Even once work starts, there can be a degree of variation. Once that project work has been done in terms of that scoping exercise, we will be in a better position to provide a little more meat on the bone about directly what will be done and what it is likely to cost. I seem to remember visiting St Patrick's College, possibly with the Member, previously. In part, that was an opportunity to see the state of the buildings, and it is good, therefore, that we are seeing, in terms of some of the provisions, a good news story as regards St Pat's.

Miss Woods: I extend my welcome to the announcement today by the Minister, and I welcome him back to the post. I am certainly glad to see that three schools in the north Down area are to be included in the scheme, as well as across the board. As Members have said, we have much to do to address the education issues that we face here. I certainly hope to work alongside the Minister, especially to address the backlog of minor works that are much needed across the estate and, as the Minister will know, have continued to pile up. Will the proposed advancement of minor works address the current backlog of projects first, and how much will be made available through that?

Mr Weir: I welcome the Member. I think that I am right in saying that she is a former pupil of Sullivan Upper, so I suppose that she will be particularly delighted to see her old school getting this advantage.

Some of the minor works will depend on what budget is available. There is also a decision to be taken because, to some extent, there are three areas — the school enhancement programme, the major capital build and minor works — and a wee bit of thought to be given to what the right concoction of the three is. It is undoubtedly the case, in terms of overall capital works, including minor works, that, while it is very welcome to see actions being taken and while the budget may be less pressed than the resource budget, it could be spent two or three times over, at least. Certainly, we will try to ensure that there is the right mix of all those elements.

Mr Allister: I express my disappointment at the neglect of the controlled sector in north Antrim. Indeed, in the entirety of County Antrim, it seems that no controlled school has been found worthy of the improvements. What a contrast with County Down and the Minister's constituencies, past and present, where four such schools are to be advanced.

Is there a particular reason why County Antrim is being ignored? *[Interruption.]* Since there have been 165 applicants and there are still over 100 schools waiting, will the Minister publish the list of those that are still waiting for inclusion in the scheme?

12.30 pm

Finally, I join Mrs Kelly in urging upon the Minister speedy action to restore autonomy to individual schools on minor works. It is preposterous that, when you have a broken window or door, you cannot simply get it fixed as you could before, and the expense to the public purse is escalating.

Mr Weir: It would, perhaps, be surprising if the Member was not expressing some level of disappointment at whatever was being said. It may have escaped the Member's notice that, for instance, Riverside Special School in Antrim is in County Antrim.

Mr Allister: The controlled sector, I said.

Mr Weir: A friend of mine has an expression: "Every day is a school day". It may surprise the Member to realise that it is also a controlled school. As part of the overall picture, 10 out of the 18 schools are from the controlled sector, and, indeed, without getting into a geography lesson, the boundaries of County Antrim mean that some of those schools that are in Belfast fall within County Antrim.

The schools were selected based on rigorous, objective criteria that were applied by officials. I did not seek in any way to interfere with those or adjust the list in any shape or form, because I think it is important that those criteria are there, fair and objectively. It will mean that, within any tranche, some schools will be successful and others will not.

I will consult with officials on the publication of any list. It may well be that that is not the basis on which schools put in an application, but I will contact the Member about what level of discussion there could be. It may well be that, from a geographical point of view, on a particular occasion, one area or another will benefit. That is based on objective criteria, and that is the way it should be.

Ms Sugden: Like others, I congratulate the Minister. His appointment is probably the most critical in providing continuity in what will be a worryingly short mandate with the time that we have left.

Generally, I am quite frustrated at how government spends money. More often than not, it feels like we are firefighting by trying to deal with issues as they are presented. We are quite reactionary, when, really, we should be trying to focus on investing to save so that we can try and save some money. Indeed, if the Prime Minister is not forthcoming with the money that we had hoped for, that is something that all Ministers will have to have a keen focus on.

Is the Minister considering the haemorrhaging of resources by many schools? I wish to pick up a point from the earlier questions from Ms Bradshaw and Mr Beggs on the Minister's consideration of split-site schools when he is considering capital investments. I appreciate that there are two different funding pots, but I think that we need to look at that strategically if we are to get somewhere with that issue.

Mr Weir: I do not, in any way, disagree with the Member. It is part of the wider picture, and capital investment has to be aligned with the overall position.

As I said, we need to see levels of reform and transformation, and some of that will be within the schools estate. It may mean that, as the Member mentioned, there is a certain level of invest to save through that transformation, and certain moneys may need to be put up front to produce better finances and educational facilities. We should not, however, kid ourselves. If we are looking at transformation of the broader schools estate, sometimes that will mean difficult decisions. While people can buy into a wider picture, perhaps when it gets to their areas, it is human nature that they will be a lot more protective and supportive of those areas.

The Member is right: we need to provide a more strategic vision and something that is more long term in its approach.

Resolution of HSC Agenda for Change Staff Dispute

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on the industrial action in health and social care (HSC) and the work that will, hopefully, bring this to an end. As this has been a fast-moving situation, I apologise to the Assembly for not providing the usual advance sight of this statement.

As this is my first time addressing the House as Minister, I want to take the opportunity to reassure the Assembly, health and social care staff and members of the public that I absolutely recognise the challenges that our health service faces. Too many patients have been waiting for far too long, and our staff, on which the health service is totally dependent, have become increasingly frustrated and demoralised. It is as a result of those daunting and unprecedented challenges that I stand in front of you as Minister. There is no issue more important than the health and well-being of our people, and I hope that, by picking this Department, we were able to demonstrate our absolute commitment to tackling and resolving the difficulties that our health service is facing.

Of course, whilst the problems are well known, we must not forget that, each and every day, our health service continues to perform extraordinary work in often incredibly difficult circumstances. That is why I especially wish to pay tribute to all our health and social care workers. There are over 70,000 people employed by the HSC and a similar number working in the independent sector. Their work is vital, and I wish to thank each and every one of them for the talent, effort and dedication they bring 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The circumstances that led to the unprecedented industrial action by HSC staff on Agenda for Change terms and conditions were hugely regrettable, and I fully appreciate the frustrations and the stresses that have led to that point. I know that it will have been an extremely hard decision for many of those to take industrial action, but I understand the reasons why they did.

I will shortly outline the measures that the Executive will take to try and bring the industrial action to an end, but I will begin by explaining the background. Agenda for Change is the national pay system for all NHS and HSC staff, with the exception of doctors, dentists and the more senior executives. It was introduced in 2004. A refresh of Agenda for Change was formally ratified at the NHS staff council in 2018, where it was agreed, in conjunction with trade unions, to implement a three-year pay deal covering the period from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2021, as well as reform of the pay structure and changes to terms and conditions. In the absence of Ministers, the Department of Health was unable to implement the three-year deal as it was implemented in the other parts of the UK. However, the Department has been engaging with HSC employers and trade unions on an Agenda for Change refresh for Northern Ireland.

At the end of 2018, a pay award, whilst not agreed with the unions, was implemented. It mirrored the first year of the three-year pay deal agreed in England. Basically, it was the same uplift, adding 3% to the pay bill, albeit from a starting point 1% lower than in England. Despite significant engagement throughout 2019, which included over 20 meetings between the Department, HSC employers and

trade unions, no agreement was made with trade unions on the year 2 — 2019-2020 — pay offer. Pay parity, together with safe staffing, are the main causes of the current dispute. Two formal offers have so far been made for 2019-2020. However, these were both rejected by trade unions as neither of them restored parity with England. Both the pay award for 2018-19, which added 3% to the pay bill, and the most recent offer made for this year, which would have added 3.1% to the pay bill, need to be viewed in the wider context of public-sector pay in Northern Ireland, where pay increases were in the region of 1%.

The developing pay dispute, together with trade union concerns on safe staffing, have caused the four largest Agenda for Change trade unions in Northern Ireland — the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), UNISON, Unite and NIPSA — to commence formal balloting of their members for industrial action, up to and including strike action. Ballots in favour of industrial action were passed by all four unions, and UNISON commenced industrial action in late November, with action short of strike across a number of sites. This industrial action escalated across the region, involving members of all four unions, with a strike on 18 December 2019, a further two days of strike action by the RCN on 8 and 10 January 2020, and strike action by UNISON on 10 January. Importantly, Members should also remain mindful that other Agenda for Change unions are balloting, or shortly intend to ballot, their members.

The industrial action caused the cancellation of thousands of outpatient and elective appointments across Northern Ireland, and trade unions have stated that, without resolution to the dispute, the action will escalate further. Three days of strike action by the RCN are scheduled on 20, 22 and 24 January, with further days scheduled in February and March.

Pay parity has been a consistent theme throughout the industrial action. Over the last number of years, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have each adopted a different approach to pay, resulting in the pay values no longer being identical in each of the four jurisdictions. Scotland's Agenda for Change pay values are higher than those in England, which in turn are higher than those in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's break in pay parity with England occurred in 2015-16 following a decision in January 2015.

Turning to the resolution of the dispute: applying England's pay values to current pay scales in Northern Ireland, with effect from 1 April 2019, will create pay parity with England. That is estimated to cost £109 million. The Department has, through a combination of in-year easements and successful bids for additional funding, been able to assemble £79 million, £50 million of which is non-recurrent funding, to increase pay for this staff grouping for 2019-2020. Therefore, an additional £30 million is required to meet the costs of Agenda for Change pay parity with England in 2019-2020. A move to pay parity will, of course, also have implications for our budget in future years.

It should be noted that a further £67 million of recurrent funding will be necessary in 2020-21 to support national living wage uplifts and if pay recommendations for other staff groups not covered by Agenda for Change, such as family health services, and the doctors' and dentists' review body recommendations are to be met.

A move to parity with England will not inherently address recruitment and retention problems in Northern Ireland. Whilst there are over 7,000 vacancies being recruited for in the HSC, the high number is due to a range of factors, including the outworkings of the transformation agenda and the creation of new staff mixes in HSC; the ever-increasing size of the workforce necessary to attempt to keep pace with the demands of a growing and ageing population; and shortages of suitably qualified staff, which is not a problem unique to Northern Ireland.

I should clarify that the funding of the £30 million cost to move to parity in the current year is to be financed by drawing forward proposed allocations for future years. So, while I am glad that it is not impacting on the funds available for other services this year, it is important to note that it has not been financed by an additional allocation to Northern Ireland.

While pay is a factor in recruitment and retention, a more significant component, as evidenced by the trade union focus on safe staffing, is the pressure on staff across the HSC. Those pressures will be properly addressed only by transforming the HSC and by fully implementing the actions in the Health and Social Care workforce strategy, which was published in 2019. In addition to pay, there is much to do on the refresh of Agenda for Change, and the Department is committed to working with trade unions on that.

Of course, pay parity has been one element of the industrial action, but the Assembly will be aware that safe staffing has also been a very significant issue for unions during this dispute, and I want to provide some assurances today. The workforce strategy aims by 2026 to meet Northern Ireland's HSC workforce needs. It includes 24 actions under three objectives: achieving the appropriate numbers and skills mix through training, commissioning, good workforce planning, provision of careers advice and the development of new roles; ensuring that staff feel valued and rewarded and that the HSC is an employer and trainer of choice; and by improving business intelligence.

The strategy, which was produced with trade unions and others, will, if implemented, greatly assist with maintaining safe staffing levels in Northern Ireland. In addition, the Department is developing options to reduce reliance and spending on agencies and locums. Trade unions have, as part of the current dispute, also made a number of requests in respect of their view of what measures are needed to address the safe staffing element of the dispute.

I respect the fact that the trade unions will end the current dispute only if pay parity is achieved and they are convinced that there is a workable plan to achieve safe staffing within a reasonable time frame. I therefore commit today to my officials working urgently with all unions to produce a costed implementation plan for safe staffing within an agreed short period. The trade union asks on safe staffing will not be delivered immediately. This will be a long-term endeavour, but I hope that unions and staff will take assurance that the plan will be realistic, that additional funding will be required and that I will bring it to the Executive for endorsement on that basis.

12.45 pm

To sum up, I believe the component parts are now in place to settle the industrial dispute. I presented a paper to Executive colleagues this morning, and I am grateful to my

fellow Ministers for endorsing those proposals. Additional funding has now been secured, and pay parity with England can be restored. Our nurses and other great health and social care workers can come off the picket line and get back to the jobs that they love and that they do so well.

As the House would expect, I have not wasted any time following today's Executive meeting. I immediately met trade union officials and briefed them on the latest developments. The new offer was outlined by me to trade union representatives this morning and will be formally submitted to them this afternoon. Officials will meet the trade unions tomorrow to agree on the detail. I am grateful to trade union leaders for the constructive meeting this morning. I appreciate that they have to go through their internal processes, and I sincerely hope and believe that the trade unions will now bring industrial action to a swift end.

To be clear, the new offer will reinstate pay parity with England, and not just for this year. My Department is providing a written commitment that it will be maintained in 2020-21. Decisive action has also been taken on the vital issue of staffing, and my Department is providing a written commitment to immediate high-level engagement with unions to produce a costed implementation plan on safe staffing within an agreed short period.

The breakthrough that we all wanted has been achieved. This is a good day, after some very difficult days. I am grateful to my colleagues around the Executive table for helping to make it happen. We have moved significantly and quickly to take action together. That is a sign of optimism for the future. I know that there is scepticism in many quarters about what this Health Minister and this Executive can do for health and social care services. That is entirely understandable. Many good people doubt whether we can set party politics aside and work together constructively. We shall see, but maybe, just maybe, today will give the sceptics some pause for thought.

We have, of course, so much more to do. This has been a very challenging period for our health and social care services, but the situation was challenging before the industrial action and will continue to be for the foreseeable future. Sustained additional funding is essential, but there are no quick fixes. We can, however, provide hope and assurance to our workforce that the problems that they have been telling us about for so long will be addressed once and for all. The Assembly, the Executive, the Department and the trusts are not just hearing those concerns but listening and acting. If devolution is to work, it has to deliver for our health service, so let us get on with it.

Mr Gildernew: Ar dtús, cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire, agus déanaim comhghairdeas leis. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment to this very important Department. I look forward to working with him and the members of the Committee to deliver on the health needs of our people here.

We all recognise that there are many challenges and huge complexity in the Department. The challenges include those around physical and mental health, but they also go across the primary, acute and social care sectors. It will require genuine partnership not only across parties, Departments and health trusts but with staff, service users and their carers. That approach will help to transform and deliver the healthcare that we need.

I ask the Minister, recognising the vital role that staff play, which he has acknowledged, to commit to work

closely with trade unions in the time ahead through the strategic health partnership forum and to reconvene the transformation advisory board.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question and welcome him to his new post as Chair of the Health Committee. I look forward to working with him, the rest of the Committee members and Gary Middleton, as your vice chair. It will be important that we have a good working relationship. That is why I will get my office to extend an invite to you, as the Chair, and the vice chair to sit down and meet me and my senior official team as soon as possible so that we can ensure that that is going on.

The Member slightly took the lead: when I met the trade unions this morning, I told them that I was reinstating the strategic health partnership forum, of which they will be a vital component. It gives the main leadership team in the trusts and the main trade union officials direct access to my ministerial office and the table where I can make decisions. I have already moved on that, and I will keep the Member abreast. If he wanted to be part of that, I would be more than happy to extend a welcome to him, as Chair of the Health Committee, to sit on the strategic forum.

Mr Middleton: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment and, indeed, the Committee Chair on his appointment. I look forward to working with you both in the time ahead. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I join him in paying tribute to the many workers in our health and social care system for all the work they do, given the challenging times that they have had to face over the past three years in particular.

The Minister's statement mentioned that pay parity on its own will not address recruitment and retention. To that end, will he work with his Executive colleagues to ensure that the graduate entry medical school in Londonderry is delivered and that we work to ensure that we address some of the unique challenges that are faced in our trusts?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I welcome him to his role as vice chair of the Health Committee and look forward to working with him. I apologise to the Chair and vice chair for not giving them advance sight of or engagement on the statement, but this morning was very quick-moving.

The Department is working on the Executive proposals for a health school at Magee. It is an Executive priority, and we are looking at it. As the Member is fully aware, we will address where that sits, given the outworkings of the financial commitments that were given last night, but I think there is a financial commitment and an intention of goodwill around the Executive table to make sure that the medical school at Magee proceeds.

Mr Durkan: I also congratulate the Minister and wish him well. We look forward to meeting him to address the many challenges that he will face. It is fair to say that the issues of pay parity and safe staffing are possibly the hottest of the hot potatoes that he has inherited, but it is also fair to say that we will all be judged on how those issues are handled and how we ensure fairness for our hard-working and heroic health workers.

The Minister's ability to ensure pay parity and safe staffing will be predicated on money and where more money can be found, although I seem to recall the Secretary of State saying that there would be money to address that issue. If

that is the case, I wonder why we are going into next year's budget to get money to address it.

The statement refers to work being done by the Department to reduce the reliance on agencies and the spend on locums. That reliance was created by disastrous decision-making in the past. I wonder whether the Minister is in a position to outline the current spend on agency staff and, at this early stage, indicate how it might be reduced, if not eradicated.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Workforce planning is key to the success of our National Health Service — that cannot be stressed enough — through the engagements with our unions and the recognition of the hard-working staff whom we relied on so heavily over the past three years while we were not in this place.

The expenditure on agency staff has tripled in the last five years. In the nursing and midwifery group alone, it has quadrupled to £52.1 million. Some 45% of the agency expenditure in 2018-19 was on nursing and midwifery, a 62% increase on the previous year. Other high agency expenditure groups are admin and clerical, which come in at £20.1 million. I suppose the Member's question is predicated on whether the Department should not simply put a stop to agency workers or whether we should look at how the issue is redressed. We have to be realistic: patient safety is paramount, and any blanket ban on the use of agencies would mean staff shortages and ward closures. We need to be realistic: there will always be a need for some agency workers to supplement full-time staff. The RCN itself has acknowledged that staff employed in the HSC are choosing to register with agencies, some to work additional hours and others to work full-time in the HSC via agency contracts. It is about making sure that we get that balance right. However, my preference is to see more full-time employees in our health service providing the excellent service and delivery that they already provide.

Mr Speaker: Before I call another Member to speak, I advise the House that more than 20 Members have indicated that they wish to ask a question. I remind you that you are here to ask a question. Thank you very much. It is just to respect the other Members who wish to get in.

Mr Chambers: I am delighted to be able to congratulate my colleague Robin Swann on his appointment as Minister of Health. I know that he will conduct his duties with efficiency and, more importantly, with compassion.

When can the staff who reluctantly and with heavy hearts took the decision to stand on picket lines to highlight their pay parity injustice expect to see the money that the Minister secured for them this morning placed into their accounts?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his kind words. I assure the House that they were not scripted by me or any of my departmental staff.

With regard to the expected money and when it can be agreed, as I said, we met trade union officials this morning. Although we have the £30 million assured now that allows us to go to pay parity, a lot of detail has to be worked out on how it is actually implemented and at what levels across various pay scales. My departmental officials, whom I thank for the work they have been doing in the absence of a Minister, will meet the trade unions tomorrow. We will get that finalisation as soon as possible, and it is hoped

that we can get the money into members' pay packets as soon as possible. At this stage, it will likely be, potentially, April at the latest. That is what we hope to see. That engagement with trade union officials started today and will continue tomorrow, and I gave them the commitment that, if needs be, we will meet them again on Thursday afternoon to finalise things so that we can stave off the industrial action that is already scheduled for next week.

Ms Bradshaw: Mr Speaker, I forgot to congratulate you on your appointment when I made my first remarks. I thank the Health Minister, and I wish him well. I look forward to working on the Health Committee and with the other health spokespersons to support you in your role.

In your statement, Minister, you talked about four trade unions. You did not mention the Royal College of Midwives, although you mentioned them briefly in some of your responses. You will know that, on 6 January this year, the college announced that it was going to ballot its members because there is £2,000 less in their pay packets than in the pay packets of midwives in England. How will you engage with them? The vacancies are maybe not as numerous in midwifery, but they are as acutely felt, and there are not as many midwives with agencies and in locum banks. How will you take that forward? Will you commit to giving them information around the new training places and to looking at the now out-of-date maternity strategy?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question, and I welcome her to the Health Committee. I know that her voice has been critical on mental health in the past few months while this place was not sitting.

The four unions that I mentioned are those that had balloted and taken industrial action. The midwives were not among those, but they are in the process of balloting members. They were in the meeting this morning, but the difficulty that we may have is that their balloting system has already started, so it may be hard for them not to proceed with the ballot for industrial action.

That is why I hope today's announcement is enough to stave off any industrial action from our midwives.

1.00 pm

In regards to the reassurances about how I engage with the midwives' union, it is a member of the strategic health partnership forum, which I said we would reinstate and get up and running. They were present with me, this morning, in the meeting, so they are fully briefed and, hopefully, up to date. I am hopeful, and if the Member has any contacts in there and can use anything to make sure that they do not go to the length of industrial action, it would be greatly appreciated.

Ms P Bradley: I join other Members in wishing the new Minister of Health every success going into the future. I like, in his statement, where he mentioned the word "optimism", because I think any Minister of Health needs to have a massive degree of optimism. I also wish the Chair and vice chair all the very best. I will miss my role in Health, but I look forward, as Chair of the Committee for Communities, to working along with Health, because so much of that overlaps.

I am also quite mindful that I was part of Agenda for Change when I worked for the Northern Trust in 2004.

It seems like an awfully long time ago. I want to ask the Minister about conversations that he may have been having around issues to do with banding. This may well have been rectified by now, but I know that, specifically, the Ambulance Service raised concerns about the banding under Agenda for Change, and they are still waiting, or they were still waiting, to hear information back on that. The Minister may or may not have that detail, but can he let me how that has proceeded?

Mr Swann: I do not have that specific answer for the Member, but I will make sure that my officials get in contact and that we write to the Member. I value the work that she did when she was Chair of the Health Committee. She was a great advocate and voice for that.

I welcome the Member to her role in Communities because, as she said, there is a great overlap, and that is something that I was stressing around the Executive table. The Department of Health has an input to every Department, every home, every house in Northern Ireland, so it is vital that we get that cross-party, cross-Executive support.

The Member talked about having optimism in taking on the role of Health Minister. Other words have been used to describe me taking on this role. "Optimism" was one of the more positive, I can assure you. I will make sure that I write to the Member about pay banding in the Ambulance Service.

Mr Sheehan: Comhghairdeas leis an Aire as a cheapachán mar Aire Sláinte. Guím gach dea-mhéin leis san am atá le teacht. Congratulations to the Minister on his appointment. I wish him every success in the time ahead.

The Minister will be aware that the nursing and midwifery task force, which was established by Michelle O'Neill when she was Minister, has recently concluded its report on the workforce. Will the Minister give a commitment to publish that report as a matter of urgency?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his warm words of welcome.

That was not mentioned in the statement, but I am happy to confirm to the Member that it was raised this morning by the RCN and the midwifery council. I have not had sight of that task force report, but I gave a commitment, this morning, that we will publish it as soon as I have had time to review it. I also gave a commitment to the unions, this morning, that I will engage with them before I publish it, so that we are all on the same page on where we are with the health service. So, rather than just rushing to publish it immediately, I am in a conversation with the trade unions and departmental officials to make sure that the task force report is fit for purpose and does the job that we want it to do.

Mr Buckley: I welcome the Minister to his place today and want to place on record my firm commitment to work closely with him and his officials in the days that lie ahead. I wholeheartedly welcome today's statement and, in particular, the speed with which it has been delivered.

As a Member for Upper Bann, I know, as the Minister will know, that Craigavon Area Hospital plays a vital role in the health service. The Minister's clarity today on a proposed way forward in relation to pay parity will mean so much to our hard-working nursing professionals as they continue to carry out the life-saving work within our health service. I

pay tribute to them for their resilience and service at what has been a very difficult time.

The Minister mentioned that, in the crisis, much attention has been around pay parity, but a grave concern for many in the medical profession is the issue of safe staffing levels. On a recent visit to Craigavon Area Hospital, I discussed winter pressures. Can the Minister outline what he intends to take forward in relation to recruitment and retention within our health service to make it a safe place for patients?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I am sure that, when he was talking about those winter pressures, if it was at the time when he was delivering presents to the children in the children's ward, I commend the Member for taking that action, because a child in a ward over the festive period needs all the positivity they can get. I want to congratulate the Member for taking that initiative.

Mr Buckley: Thank you.

Mr Swann: Recruitment and retention is a key piece of work in our workforce planning, and we do have to make sure that we value the nurses and the health service workers that we have in place. Today, I hope that, by moving to pay parity with the English level and our reassurances and commitments to safe working standards, we actually start to move to that reassurance that they will stay in their posts longer and will see the health service in Northern Ireland as a good place to work. As Minister, that is where I want to take us.

With regard to recruitment, we will be working with the trade unions on the number of nurse placements we can actually take on. We have to be realistic that a trainee nurse has to have live experience on a ward. While high numbers may look good on paper, we have to make sure that trainees are provided with the training that they actually need to deliver the service that they want to deliver and we want them to deliver.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Thank you very much. Congratulations to yourself. I appreciate the statement that you have brought forward in such a timely fashion. You may have correspondence from me on your desk regarding drugs for cystic fibrosis sufferers and suicide prevention initiatives in North Belfast. I look forward to your response and even meeting you about those.

The Minister and other Members have mentioned the issues with recruitment and retention and workforce planning, particularly around safe staffing. Can the Minister, to the best of his ability today, even through this renewed strategic health partnership forum, try to look seriously at workforce planning, because I, too, remember Agenda for Change in 2004. Our concern is that we are putting public money into private healthcare to the detriment of health and social care workers, effectively privatising a service that needs to be free at the point of delivery.

I wish the Minister well, but, in the coming months and, indeed, the time ahead, I look forward to more substantial plans — if we get this resolved this year — to tackle the big, big issues around workforce planning.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question and her two letters. I can assure her that if she has sent me two letters, they are somewhere in the pile that I have received over the past —

Ms Ní Chuilín: Move them to the top.

Mr Swann: We will see, Carál. *[Laughter.]* I make no promises or commitments here today. I remember how you treated me when you were a Minister. *[Laughter.]* It was not too bad, to be fair. *[Laughter.]* With regard to workforce planning, let us not underestimate the scale of the problem it has been, and let us not underestimate how much more difficult it became in the past three years without the strategic leadership that a Minister and elected officials could give.

My engagement today with departmental officials and union officials, and the creation of the strategic health partnership forum, I hope will bring about good things and a truly inclusive, positive engagement process at the head of the Department of Health, and around my ministerial table, because I think that is how it works. It is when we are all playing an integral part, playing the same part, to make sure we are actually delivering for the staff who work for us and for the patients who need us.

Mrs D Kelly: I also congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I reiterate our party leader's commitment to working, and not playing party politics, with the portfolio that you carry and the heavy workload that you have.

Minister, in relation to the workforce strategy and, in particular, around the recruitment of, perhaps, mature students, will you commit to looking at best practice elsewhere? I understand that, in the South of Ireland, colleges of further education are used extensively, particularly for the training of mature students.

While there is terrific news for nurses, I believe that it must also include social care staff, because one cannot work without the other.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Certainly, if there is best practice out there, then that is how we learn. There is no point in the Department of Health in Northern Ireland trying to recreate a wheel or a functioning body that already works elsewhere. I am happy to commit to doing that and getting my officials set up along those lines.

With regard to the utilisation of mature students and how we introduce them into the workforce, I do not want to repeat what I said previously. Hopefully the utilisation of Magee and bringing forward advanced and mature students up there will have an active role, if we can get the collegiate funding to get that off the ground. However, we also need to be strategic. I am sure that the Member remembers how, in my role in Employment and Learning, I openly promoted the Open University. It has active training courses for nurses and social workers. I might as well get the plug in now that that is there. It is about how we look at every avenue for enhanced training and bringing mature students and mature employees into the National Health Service. That is what makes it work: when we have that balance and wide range of individuals delivering the health service in Northern Ireland.

Mr Butler: I want to take the opportunity to wish Mr Swann all the best in his job as Minister of Health. Indeed, it is possibly one of the most important roles that any of us could perform in elected politics. I look forward to the next few years as he delivers the transformation that is so badly needed. I am sure that the House will join me in thanking the staff who have endured for a number of years and took that really hard decision when they were balloted

for action. If you are employed in any facet of a blue-light service, where you are trying to protect and save life, the most difficult thing that you will ever do is take industrial action. Full credit must go to them.

I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he give a ministerial commitment to tackle, through the workforce strategy, in a risk-appropriate manner, the areas of greatest need with regard to workforce planning — in particular, I am thinking about the areas of mental health and learning disability — and look at strategies that have been embarked upon in England to attract staff to those very difficult fields and, indeed, retain those staff?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. It is important that we all acknowledge the role, commitment and support that there is for mental health in the National Health Service in regards to our mental health support teams, activists, charities and commissioners that we have out there. Mental health is an important area in the health and social care system. Parity of esteem between mental health and physical health will be key to that. The Department of Health has been considering actions that can improve mental health provisions for those who need them. I am keen to improve mental health services. I am considering a draft mental health action plan that can take some of those actions forward and put mental health where it should be at the centre of the National Health Service.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Flynn: Congratulations to Mr Swann on his appointment as Minister of Health. I welcome the measures that he has outlined to resolve the pay parity issue and, hopefully, bring the industrial action to an end. However, I would also like to highlight some of the serious and genuine ongoing concerns around how we as a society — not necessarily specifically the Department of Health — deal with the complex issue of mental ill health and, indeed, suicide prevention. Can he give assurances that he will fund fully the recently published Protect Life 2 suicide prevention strategy? I should also say that I look forward to engaging with the Minister on these critical issues in the time ahead.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question and welcome her to the House.

Protect Life 2 was not specifically mentioned in the statement, but the suicide prevention strategy is critical and central to the Department of Health's work. I will give the Member my commitment to the full implementation of Protect Life 2 when there is realisation of the funding that I require from other Executive colleagues, because it has been costed at between £3 million to £4 million of recurring funding.

In my opinion, it would be money well spent, because it would alleviate pressures from elsewhere in the health service, the Department for Communities and other areas, but, at this point in time, I will need Executive buy-in from colleagues to make sure that we have the support to bring that forward in our Department. I welcome and acknowledge the support that I have received from ministerial colleagues and other parties in taking on this health issue, and the Department of Health will require that collegiate approach. So far, I have been appreciative of that. It is three days in, so we are doing not too bad.

1.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Off to a good start, Robin.

Mr Lyttle: That our health and social care staff regarded strike action as necessary should be a source of serious reflection, if not shame, for the Assembly. Our only response now can be to prioritise the health and well-being of our health and social care staff. Therefore, will the Health Minister assure our nurses and health and social care staff that he will introduce safe staffing legislation to the Assembly, recruit additional nurses and seek to improve nursing bursary provision in order to protect the health and well-being of our health and social care staff in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: There is a lot in the Member's ask there, and I thank him for his question. When I took over this portfolio, I prioritised pay parity because I thought that was the most critical issue we had to resolve as an Assembly to give us some semblance of credibility, and, again, I am supportive of the other parties that did that.

The Member asked me to take a list of actions. I apologise; I do not remember them all off the top of my head, but I will give him a firm reassurance that, in my first-day brief, which I received on Saturday afternoon and am still reading, the issues and challenges that lie solely in this Department are massive, and the only way we can get the Department of Health to work and work effectively is with the support of every Member and Minister in the House to truly value the individuals whom we have left at the front line on their own for the last three years.

Mr McCartney: Comhghairdeas leis an Aire. I congratulate the Minister on what is, obviously, a very challenging portfolio. I welcome the statement. I welcome the speed with which you have met the unions and, hopefully, share your optimism that you have put on the table an offer that will see an end to the industrial action.

A big part of your statement was the historical context of the dispute, but, as we go forward and, particularly, given your own portfolio and the fact that you have got the pledge from all parties to be supportive of you, critical to that is ensuring that we have some mechanism whereby we look at the long-term implications of decisions that are made in the here and now. This is a classic case of, sometimes, a decision being made that, people think, is the right thing to do at one time that only pushes another challenge down the road. We need a commitment from the Minister to ensure that we have a mechanism in place to safeguard us against that.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I thought it was important to set out the historical reasons why we got to where we are, because I agreed with Chris Lyttle when he said that it should never have happened. We should never have been in a place where we left our nurses so exposed that, after 104 years, they felt industrial action was necessary.

I am optimistic, because I had a good engagement with the unions this morning, but I want to make Members aware that it is now over to them and their boards to make that decision. I have gone as far as I can go, and I think the Executive stretched themselves as to where they allowed me to go with the trade unions this morning, and I hope that that is reciprocated. The words I used to the trade unions this morning were that, on 18 December, I stood

with them: I asked them this morning to stand with me so we can foresee and prevent that industrial action.

In regard to how we bring about that collegiate approach to make sure we offset this in the future, I hope that that strategic health partnership forum that we re-established this morning to get up and running again does some of that foresight, forward-looking programme. We have fantastic officials in the Department of Health — the chief nurse; all the rest of them with practical experience — but it is good to bring our unions in and those on the ground to have that experience sitting round the table. Sometimes, a nurse on a ward can see something that a Minister in an office can never see or realise.

Ms S Bradley: Congratulations on your appointment, Mr Speaker. I also welcome the Minister. I congratulate you and assure you of my support as you take on what has to be acknowledged as probably one of the most challenging portfolios.

I welcome the Minister's statement, and, as a South Down MLA who stood outside Daisy Hill with healthcare workers on very damp and wet occasions, I think that it was notable that they expressed how they professionally felt very vulnerable turning up to shifts where there simply were not enough people on duty, only to arrive home to find that they were consistently underpaid. I appreciate that that problem has been compounded through no fault of the Minister but not least because of three years of inaction from the House, of which we should all be ashamed.

Those extremely undervalued healthcare workers have today, hopefully, got the message from the House that they are valued. They stood out there to represent everybody in society, including us, because, unfortunately, the health service is something that each of us at some stage in our life will need to lean on.

I am a little concerned, Minister, when I look through the statement. I appreciate that it was a very swift gathering of resources and a creative way of bringing easement to the problem, but you speak of "easements", which I am curious to know more about. I do not expect that detail, perhaps, today, but I will at a later time. I am keen to know how we put this on a more sustainable footing through efficiencies in the health service. Will the Minister look at every opportunity available to find those efficiencies? Some may lie in an all-island approach to health, and I urge him to look in that direction.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. I am due to meet the Minister of Finance tomorrow about the budgeting process, before we go back to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister with regard to where the financial package finishes up.

We have prime examples of where cross-border working works with regard to children's heart surgery, which has been developed and is already working very well. Regarding an all-island health service, I would prefer to stick with the UK's National Health Service, because it is free at the point of use and free at the point of delivery. That is the health service that we in Northern Ireland respect and value, regardless of class, creed, political persuasion or anything else. Our National Health Service in Northern Ireland is something that we should cherish and value. I know that the Member feels the same.

Mr Beggs: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment to a challenging post and for his swift engagement with his Executive colleagues, his departmental staff and the trade unions. I hope that we can bring the dispute to an end, have fair pay for our valued healthcare staff and ensure that, in the future, there will be safe working conditions for them all.

The Minister indicates in his statement that there are 7,000 vacancies in the health and social care structure — quite an enormous number — and that transformation is one of the reasons for those vacancies. Can he assure us that, in moving forward, there will be more advance planning, so that staff will be trained in a timely fashion and, when change occurs, we are not left with vacancies and forced to employ expensive locums? Can he also assure us that services will be speedily implemented and improved?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I do not want to sound like a broken record, but, with the forward-looking, "Change is coming" approach that the Health Department and the health service will need to take, I am hopeful that the strategic health partnership forum will be able to identify the gaps between where we intend going and what we are able to do. I hope that those working on the front line on the wards and in our National Health Service at ground level can identify the gaps between what we expect and what we can get people to do so that those gaps are not so significant that we have to bring in additional staff to plug them. I am putting a lot of reliance on the strategic health partnership forum, which has not met in a very long time, but it is the right body for engagement so that we can take forward a lot of the challenges, do the forward planning and look into where our difficulties and opportunities lie.

Mr McGlone: Comhghairdeachas leis an Aire. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment, and I look forward to dealing with him on a few issues, locally and more regionally. Of course, among the issues are workforce issues, many of which have already been dealt with in some detail here, but particularly those relating to district nursing and health visitors. Will the Minister look at those? We have heard so much today about the difficulties that forced staff to take industrial action. Will the Minister, as a gesture of goodwill, instruct health chiefs not to dock the pay of those staff, many of whom are in difficult financial circumstances? It would be a substantial and significant goodwill gesture on behalf of the Department.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I assure him that that is not the first time that I have been asked that question today. I cannot give that commitment, because it has not been costed or looked at. However, as an expression of goodwill, pay parity is a significant step towards reassuring our staff in the National Health Service that we value them. The additional conditionality that they will not lose pay is not something that I can commit to here today, and I do not know whether it is something that I can legally do. I will explore it, but I will give no commitment.

Mr Dallat: I add my best wishes and support as someone who has, in recent times, been receiving extraordinary medical attention in Altnagelvin Hospital from outstanding doctors and nurses. Will the Minister take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that never again will staff feel so demoralised that they feel the need to join picket lines and that, instead, they are allowed to concentrate on their vocations, which, of course, is in the interests of not just

the National Health Service but all of us who have had the experience of benefiting from it?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. May I just say how good it is to see you here today? You are looking well.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Swann: I appreciate the fact that you are here, because I know that, when there is a tough question to be asked of the Health Department, you are able to do it. What you have asked for here today is, I think, a commitment that everyone in the House should give, not just me as Health Minister. We should never have allowed our health service and our nurses to be pushed to the point where industrial action was the only option they saw to get their message across. They did not want to do it. I know from talking to many of them that it was their last, last resort. I am hopeful that, after today's meeting and today's commitments, we will see them de-escalating that industrial action next week and that the other unions intending to ballot their members on industrial action will find some way of sidestepping that. I hope that the trade unions, through their engagement with me this morning, know that, with me, they have somebody they can talk to and somebody who will listen to them. Again, I am glad to see the Member in his place.

Ms Bailey: I also welcome the Minister into office. I commend you for producing the statement in your very short three days in office so far. Very well done.

I go back to the funding numbers that you gave for the in-year easements. I noted that you could not give any particular detail on where they might come from and said that you would speak to the Finance Minister. Will the Minister let us know whether that will come strictly from the health budgets, or will you look for cross-departmental support for that? I am also really keen to know whether the Minister believes that the settlement that has been produced and put forward today could have been achieved before now, in the absence of a local Minister in post.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her questions. In regard to the easements, it is my understanding that the £79 million that was "assembled" — I think that that was the word that was used — to go towards the 2019-2020 pay parity settlement is all internal Department of Health moneys. I will check that and come back to the Member and verify that.

1.30 pm

Do I think that this could have been delivered without a Minister? No. That is very clear. I do not want to get party political about where we are going, but that is why we as a party thought that a Minister, even a direct rule Minister, was needed to introduce this. Not only did we put our health workers in an invidious position but we put our departmental officials in an invidious position, which they should not have been in. They are there to deliver the directions of elected officials, not to take them themselves. Let us go to the step now that there is a Minister and an Assembly in place and that we will take our responsibilities rather than leaving it to others.

Mr Allister: I join the Minister in paying tribute to our remarkable health workers across the service. That was a well-made tribute. In that context, and although it

was not the Minister's responsibility, the present dispute arose because a Northern Ireland Executive foolishly broke pay parity in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister take the opportunity today, on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive, to apologise to the health workers for the breaking of pay parity and taking us into this crisis, which did not otherwise need to have that dimension?

Secondly, I am dismayed to hear that, although the Minister is finding money to sort the pay parity issue, he is having to borrow it from next year. How does he square that along with the assertion that there is no financial money to carry it forward? How does he square that with the boast of the Secretary of State that there was money to deliver a resolution? Is it confirmation that parties signed up to a deal without the certainty of the funding, and how stupid was that?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his points and questions. I am not in a position to make an apology for a previous Executive. Personally, I apologise to our health service workers, who were left in a position that they felt that strike action was the only option they had. It is incumbent on all of us to get to a position in which that never happens again.

I value the Member's critique of the Executive. I value it and welcome it, because he is able to point out what others may not be able to see or may not want to admit to seeing. When we met the Secretary of State last night, it was very clear, from all the parties, that what had been proposed or offered was not on the table. Now, whether that was the Secretary of State or Treasury's doing, I am not in a position to answer, but I assure the Member that, from the point that we found that out yesterday evening, there was serious engagement between the Department of Finance, the Treasury, the Secretary of State and the Department of Health to ensure that we were in a position today to find the £30 million that is needed in-year this year to provide pay parity.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he confirm that, since no new funding streams were provided as part of the new deal, as confirmed by this announcement, funding streams to resolve industrial action were already within the capacity of the Health Ministry, proving what parties like People Before Profit and the health workers said from the start: the money was always there for pay parity? Will he also confirm that the new Executive were, indeed, duped by the British and Irish Governments on the promise of funding?

Mr Swann: I have to disagree with the Member. The money was not there; we did not have the £30 million that we needed to finish off pay parity for 2019-2020. By bringing moneys forward from the next two years, we will ensure that we can guarantee pay parity for next year as well. I want to give our staff the reassurance that the moneys are there today and in the future. I give the Member a commitment that, to the best of my knowledge, the money was not there to be signed off immediately that could have solved this issue without a Minister being in place.

Ms Sugden: I congratulate the Minister, both personally and professionally. I sincerely wish you well. You have taken on the most difficult brief, and the Ulster Unionist Party has to be commended for doing so, as the two parties before them seemed to avoid that brief like the plague.

Thank you for your statement. I appreciate the rapid response in taking the decisions that you have taken. It is very clear that every Member agrees with the actions that you are going to take to try to resolve this pay dispute and, indeed, the issues with safer staffing. I also appreciate the commitment for 2021. It is really important that the workers get that because we are very quickly coming to the end of this financial year.

The figure that very much jumps out at me is the £67 million that has not yet been found, and I expect that it will be, at minimum, another £67 million for the year 2021-22 that you, indeed, would have responsibility for. Altogether, we are looking for £134 million that has not been found anywhere. Indeed, I hope the gentleman down the hill at Stormont House hears those figures, because it is important that he does. In addition to that are all the other pressures in relation to resolving waiting lists, which, indeed, was another commitment that was in the New Decade, New Approach deal. Is the Minister confident that we will be able to secure those moneys? I appreciate all the commitments that he has made to date, but how realistic is it that we will be able to deliver the promises in the new deal and also those in the written commitment that he has put before this House today?

Mr Swann: I will start with the latter point. It is a written commitment that I have put before the House today, so I will hold myself responsible, and the Member should know that.

In regard to the rapid engagement with the unions, I want to commend them for their reaction and their speed in taking on the proposal that we put to them this morning, because it is important that we try to forestall any more industrial action because that only adds to the difficulties.

Living wage increases will have to be found and be delivered and, like you, I hope that other people are listening and other people realise that, when our Government in Westminster make an announcement on an increase in the living wage, it has a knock-on effect on other Departments, other industries and other sectors across this United Kingdom.

The Member used one word that I hope that I will never hear again and that is “plague”, because, in my first-day brief, I found out that, if there is an outbreak, I am probably responsible for it as well. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: I will remember that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Swann: No, but I sincerely thank the Member for her support and the critique that she will provide, because I value it and I value her engagement as well.

Assembly Business

Election of the Principal Deputy Speaker

Mr Speaker: I am pleased to inform you that the technical hitch with the electronic voting recording system has been resolved. All Members have now had an opportunity to pass through the Lobbies and register their vote.

Ayes 49; Noes 31.

AYES

Nationalist

Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Unionist

Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, 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 Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr M Bradley and Mr Robinson.

NOES

Nationalist

Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon.

Unionist

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden.

Other

Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bradshaw and Ms McLaughlin.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>[61.3%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>[69.4%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>[68.6%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support);

That Mr Christopher Stalford be Principal Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Mr Speaker: I offer my congratulations to the Principal Deputy Speaker, Christopher Stalford, as the motion has been agreed.

I remind party Whips that the Business Committee is due to meet in 10 minutes, immediately after this session is adjourned. The Business Committee has agreed that, in order to allow time for parties to allocate Committee membership, the next sitting should take place on Monday 20 January 2020, and an Order Paper will be issued today after the Business Committee has met.

Adjourned at 1.40 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 20 January 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Assembly Commission: Vacancies

Mr Speaker: As is required by Standing Order 79(4), I inform the Assembly that, in accordance with Standing Order 79(5), two vacancies exist in the Assembly Commission that must be filled within 28 days.

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr McGrath: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 20 January 2020.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 20 January 2020.

Business Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Keith Buchanan replace Mr Gordon Lyons as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr Lyons.]

Resolved:

That Mr John O'Dowd and Ms Sinéad Ennis replace Ms Carál Ní Chuilín and Mr Declan McAleer as members of the Business Committee. — [Ms Ní Chuilín.]

Standing Order 49(2)(a) and Standing Order 52(2)(a): Suspension

Mr McGrath: I beg to move

That Standing Order 49(2)(a) and Standing Order 52(2)(a) be suspended.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 49(2)(a) and Standing Order 52(2)(a) be suspended.

Statutory Committee Membership

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 49(3), the membership of the Statutory Committees as detailed in NIA 5/17-22 be approved. — [Mr McGrath.]

Standing Committee Membership

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 52(3), the membership of the Standing Committees as detailed in NIA 6/17-22 be approved. — [Mr McGrath.]

Executive Committee Business

European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill

Mr Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is the motion on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you confirm that the debate that we are about to embark on is on a motion that cannot be amended in consequence of the Executive Office choosing to lay the motion late on Friday? If Members were like me, they got notice at 3.46 pm, and, of course, our Standing Orders require amendments to be tabled two full days before debate. In consequence, we have reached the farcical situation where we are going to debate a motion that no Member can amend. Is that correct?

Mr Speaker: The fact of the matter, Mr Allister, is that the Executive Office tabled the motion late on Friday, and we issued that to the Business Committee, which approved and reaffirmed it this morning at our meeting at 9.30 am. I accept entirely, Mr Allister — I say this to the House — that it is regrettable that the motion came as late as it did. However, I expect that the First Minister and deputy First Minister, who will address the matter, will elaborate on and deal with that to the satisfaction of the House.

Obviously, I want to make sure that, at all times, Executive business is conducted in a way that allows the Assembly to conduct its duties with the rigorous integrity that it is duty-bound to do, and the Member will very much be a key person in that regard. As I say, Standing Orders did not provide for the ability to take amendments, and, therefore, we are in the position we are in. However, even looking at the amendment that had been tabled by Friday, the advice given to me was that the motion in the Order Paper is of a quite specific and narrow scope, and, therefore, amendments that might have been tabled may well not have been ruled as normally acceptable. That is where we are at the moment.

I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister this morning, setting out my concerns in relation to that. We have been in exceptional circumstances: there is no question about that. That is why the motion came from the Executive at such short notice. Under those circumstances, that is the business that we are in this morning.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, may I, under Standing Order 16, move that we delay the debate for seven days, on the basis that it is only right and proper that any matter, not least one of this magnitude, should be debated in circumstances where Members should have the capacity to propose amendments? It really is a sad situation if the Executive think that the Assembly is a mere tool that they can bounce motions through without any opportunity to amend.

I wish to have leave, under Standing Order 16, to move that we postpone for seven days or sooner.

Mr Speaker: I will look at that now momentarily, and I will come back in one second. So, Members, take your ease for a second.

12.15 pm

European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill: Motion to Delay

Mr Speaker: OK, Members. A motion has been proposed by Mr Allister that the Assembly adjourns the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill 2019-20 for seven days. I am content that the motion is in order and will allow up to 30 minutes for debate. Members will have a maximum of three minutes in which to make their comments and should indicate their desire to speak by informing officials at the Table. The mover of the motion will have three minutes in which to propose and three minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. If the House divides, the vote will be by simple majority.

I propose to suspend the sitting for 10 minutes to allow Members to make arrangements in relation to speaking on the debate. The Assembly is, by leave of the House, suspended for 10 minutes.

The sitting was suspended at 12.17 pm and resumed at 12.29 pm.

Mr Speaker: Members, the sitting is resumed. The next item of business is a motion to delay the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill 2019-20. The debate will last for up to 30 minutes. The proposer will have three minutes in which to propose and three minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have three minutes.

The motion was as follows:

That this Assembly, in accordance with Standing Order 16, adjourns the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill 2019-20 for seven days.

Mr Allister: This is a very simple and net point: it is an elementary rule of debate in any forum, from a school debating society right through to the most elevated forum in the land, that, when a matter such as a motion is being debated, it can be amended. That is how fora express themselves and finesse the view of any particular forum. It is through amendments that that process is perfected. Yet here we have a proposition that, in the House, under the guise of a new approach, the Executive Office brings a motion so late that it cannot be amended. That is the sort of action that the Politburo would be proud of.

12.30 pm

Either we are a properly democratic Assembly, so constituted, or we are just a tool of the Executive. If we are a proper debating chamber for Northern Ireland, we need to have the facility to sift, debate and amend any motion that comes before us. It is astounding that the very first item of motioned business in the House, from the most primary functionaries in the House, should be a motion that defies those most fundamental democratic rules and procedures and is a motion that cannot, by virtue of the lateness with which it was brought, be amended. That cannot be right. Therefore, I urge the House that we take the time to follow due process — until next Monday, if that is the scheduled date, or an earlier date that would allow amendments. There is nothing to lose in doing that, but a lot of credibility to lose in not doing it.

Mr Speaker: Can the Member confirm that he is proposing the motion?

Mr Allister: I so propose.

Mr Stalford: This is a simple matter: it is the last available time for the House to express an opinion on the content of the European Union withdrawal agreement. The Scottish Parliament has expressed its opinion. The Welsh Assembly will be expressing its opinion on the content of the withdrawal agreement tomorrow morning. Therefore, this is our last available opportunity to express a view. I speak as someone who was on the same side of the Brexit argument as Mr Allister and who is happy to vote for the motion because I do not agree to the content of the European Union withdrawal agreement. I do not need to amend the proposal, because it clearly states the view that my party leader and party have expressed.

The choice is therefore this: do we have a debate on the record in the Assembly that affords all Members an opportunity to express their view before the withdrawal agreement passes through Parliament at Westminster, or do we forgo that opportunity to give a statement of the views of the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland and allow the withdrawal agreement to go through without our input into that debate at Westminster? This is important. It is the defining issue of the age, and if the suggestion is that the withdrawal agreement should be a done-and-dusted effort before the Northern Ireland Assembly takes the opportunity to express an opinion on it, I do not think that that would be a particularly constructive way for us, as the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, to proceed. This motion may be great parliamentary japes, but it is doing nothing to serve the people whom we were sent here to serve.

Mr O'Dowd: Apologies for not hearing the start of the debate, a Cheann Comhairle. Although, to a certain extent, I agree with Mr Allister that the Assembly has to be given its place and that, as we move forward, the Assembly and its Committees etc must carry out their functions with impartiality and vigour, there will always be an exception to those rules. Given the time frames that we are working to, which have been set by neither the Executive nor the Assembly, the Assembly has little choice but to move forward today and debate and vote on the Executive Office motion.

As Mr Stalford said, there will be different reasons why different parties vote in favour of the Executive Office motion. There has not been unity on the issue of Brexit across the political parties to date, and I suspect that we will not find that today. Therefore, everyone will have an opportunity to put on record their views. My experience has been that the British Government and Westminster have paid little regard to what the people here have said about Brexit thus far, and I have no reason to believe they will pay any attention to what we say into the future. I do think, however, given the extraordinary circumstances that we are in, that the Assembly should proceed as planned with what is in the Order Paper.

Ms Mallon: We are also sympathetic to the arguments put forward by Mr Allister, but we have not had an Assembly in three years. In that time, the Scottish Parliament has had its say. The Welsh Assembly has had its say and will again have its say tomorrow. As other Members have indicated, today is our last opportunity to have our say, in advance of tomorrow's sitting of the House of Lords, which presents the last opportunity to amend the Bill. Although we are sympathetic, these are extraordinary times, and, as

a result of having had no Assembly, we are restricted, so today we need to unite and speak with one voice.

Dr Aiken: We, too, have a lot of sympathy for Mr Allister's motion and for what other Members have said. We need to be very aware, however, that we have not had sufficient time to debate the issue, and there is time before the withdrawal deal goes through in the other House for us to get our position across.

We, like many other parties, have been working very closely with the business community and civic society, and we would have wished amendments to be put into the Executive Office motion to be able to make the points clear, particularly on the withdrawal agreement. We therefore support the motion.

Ms Armstrong: Today, it feels as though we are caught between a rock and a hard place. Although we were part of a cross-party group that wanted an amendment to go forward, we find that the timescales are so tight that we are not allowed. This motion is absolutely correct. We should have been afforded the time to put forward our amendments. However, that is not the case, and, as others have indicated — Mr O'Dowd, for example — the timescales are against us, set not in this place but in another place.

Unfortunately, and with a very heavy heart, we cannot agree with Mr Allister today. We want to go forward with the Executive Office's motion. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for writing to the Executive Office. The Assembly needs to be able to scrutinise and amend appropriately, and I thank you for taking that forward. Today, unfortunately, just because of the timescales, we will be voting against the motion.

Mr Poots: I do not have any sympathy with Mr Allister on the issue. What we are seeing is pure grandstanding and seeking of attention. What we have in front of us is legislation that is going through Westminster. We are to give an opinion on it, and if we do not give an opinion this week, we will not have the opportunity to give an opinion. Maybe Mr Allister does not want to give an opinion on where he stands on the European Union. Our party is very happy to do so and is very clear on its position. It is useful that the Assembly will have the opportunity to send a message to Westminster on where it stands on this particular issue. It would be absolute foolishness not to proceed with the motion today. We should deal with it and allow Westminster to hear what we have to say.

Mr Allister: What we have not heard in the debate, of course, is why, if this is a matter that is exercising the Executive, they did not table the motion on Wednesday or Tuesday. Why did they wait until Friday evening to table the motion, knowing that that prevented amendments? We have had no explanation from the lead parties in the Executive or the Executive Office as to why the motion was not tabled in a timely manner. We are then told that it is our last opportunity. Is it? If the House sat on Wednesday, could we not debate the matter with amendments? The Bill is still in the House of Lords, as I understand it. It has yet to return to the Commons, so it is a bit threadbare to say that this is the last chance saloon opportunity. If that were really the thinking, and if there were respect for the processes of the House, the motion that we are invited to debate would have been tabled long before 5.00 pm or later on Friday last. It is a contemptible

way in which to treat the House, and I trust that Members will bear that in mind.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 14; Noes 62.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Allister and Ms Sugden.

NOES

Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mr Catney, Mr Clarke, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Mr Givan, Ms Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuillín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stafford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Ennis and Mr Robinson.

Question accordingly negatived.

1.00 pm

European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill

Mr Speaker: Members will be aware that this item was added to the Order Paper after last week's Business Committee meeting and that a revised Order Paper was issued. I hope that, as a courtesy to the House, the Minister will give a full explanation for the late tabling of this legislation. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to three hours for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): I beg to move

That the Assembly notes the request from the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union for the consent of the Assembly for the provisions of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill that affect its competence; and affirms that the Assembly does not agree to give its consent.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union wrote to us last week and asked that we provide consent to Her Majesty's Government legislating on our behalf in relation to the provisions of the EU (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill that affect the legislative competence of this Assembly.

First, ordinarily, the deputy First Minister and I would have brought the motion forward within the established time frame, and we are sorry that that was not the case today. We took the view that it was important to provide Members with the earliest possible opportunity to consider this key matter.

This is the last chance for us to have our views aired in this place. The Third Reading of the Bill is in the House of Lords tomorrow afternoon. Scotland has already expressed its view, and the Welsh Assembly is debating its view tomorrow morning. We felt that it was important to put this motion down, albeit late. We accept that, but we felt that it was important that Members be given the opportunity to air their differing opinions — and there will be differing opinions on this matter — on the Floor of the House. Whilst I hear what Mr Allister is saying, I think that it is important that this Assembly puts forward its views, however varied they may be, so that the House of Lords is aware of them tomorrow when it has the Third Reading.

I remind Members as to the nature of the —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: I have covered the issues that Mr Allister raised in his debate.

I remind Members of the nature of the legislative consent process. In 1998, when devolution took effect in Scotland and Wales, Her Majesty's Government established a convention — known as the Sewel convention — that Parliament would not normally legislate on devolved matters without the consent of the relevant regional Parliament or Assembly. That convention has generally worked well but has become controversial in the context of Brexit. In particular, the Scottish Government and Parliament objected strongly to the UK Parliament taking a power potentially to retain at the United Kingdom level some of the many powers that affect devolved services

that are returning to the United Kingdom as a result of us leaving the European Union.

This is our first chance as an Assembly to consider this issue, and for some of the aspects of the legislation that were made in the last three years, and indeed for some aspects of the current Bill, the effect of Her Majesty's Government's approach is to limit the role of the devolved Administrations in deciding and agreeing policy, though, in fairness, some of the aspects of the legislation are relatively technical and uncontroversial.

As I indicated, there was insufficient time to bring this matter to the Assembly through the established legislative consent process, but the deputy First Minister and I felt that it was proper for the Assembly to have its say on the matter. In any case, our procedures primarily provide for agreeing to give consent. In this case, the deputy First Minister and I agree that we should recommend that consent is not given, albeit for different reasons, hence the motion that we have brought today.

The clauses that the UK Government wish to legislate for on our behalf are outlined in the Secretary of State's letter, a copy of which has been made available to Members. The withdrawal agreement Bill will give legal standing to the deal that has been secured by the UK Government with the European Union and upon which the UK will leave the European Union. Members will be familiar with that deal. The United Kingdom and the European Union have agreed that the United Kingdom's exit will be followed by a time-limited implementation period, which will last until 31 December 2020. During the implementation period, European Union law will continue to apply to the UK under the terms set out in the withdrawal agreement. Therefore, new pieces of directly applicable European Union law will continue to apply automatically within the whole of the United Kingdom.

The explanatory notes accompanying the withdrawal agreement Bill set out the Government's view of the Bill's purpose and main functions. The Parts of the Bill with particular relevance to matters within the legislative competence of the Assembly include Part 1, the implementation period; Part 2, remaining implementation of the withdrawal agreement etc; and Part 3, citizens' rights, specifically clauses and associated schedules relating to citizens' rights, and the establishment and functioning of the independent monitoring authority.

In Part 4, of particular relevance are clauses relating to the implementation of the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol and the protection of certain rights safeguarded in the Belfast Agreement, as well as those relating to other technical issues such as financial provisions and the implementation of European Union legislation during the implementation period.

Members will be well aware that, for various reasons, all parties in the Executive have serious reservations about the deal that has been secured by the United Kingdom Government and therefore, by extension, about the withdrawal agreement Bill. The deputy First Minister and I are in agreement that it would not be in our interest to assent to this request as it is always preferable that the Assembly legislates for itself. I feel it is important to stress that Parliament and Her Majesty's Government should at all times seek our views on relevant issues.

It is fitting that my first statement to the House following the restoration of the Executive deals with an issue on which we are all prepared to work together to advance the interests of Northern Ireland irrespective of our political views. The amendments to the withdrawal agreement Bill supported by local MPs from across the political spectrum have demonstrated that the will is there for different parties to work together in the best interests of our people and businesses.

As an Executive, we will work together to represent the concerns of all our citizens and ensure that our voice is heard. I commend the many business organisations that have been working with political parties across the spectrum to try to find amendments, which, at the end of the day, were not taken by the Government, but I think they demonstrated that there was cross-party agreement in relation to those amendments.

We recognise that the United Kingdom Government is determined to press ahead with the withdrawal agreement Bill irrespective of whether we give our consent but, in our view, this will have a significant impact on our devolution settlement. We will be making it clear that, with the restoration of the Executive and the commitment of all parties to work together, the Government must recognise our devolution settlement and should not normally legislate in the devolved space without consent.

Our priority for Brexit is to ensure that the needs of Northern Ireland are understood and are reflected as we move forward. Our unique position, in that we are the only region of the United Kingdom that will have a land border with the European Union, requires very specific solutions to protect and enhance trade. While the withdrawal agreement Bill provides powers to implement the protocol, the 'New Decade, New Approach' document goes further and, indeed, includes further commitments from the United Kingdom Government.

We understand that the detailed arrangements will be contained in future secondary legislation and will secure some of the main points on which our MPs had agreed in the amendments that were not made in the Commons debate two weeks ago. We will therefore be making representation to Her Majesty's Government that it is imperative that they fulfil all their commitments and that we are involved at an early stage on any policy discussions around future legislation brought forward under the powers provided by the withdrawal agreement Bill.

While the withdrawal agreement Bill is likely to be implemented by the United Kingdom Government, this is not the end of the matter. There are a number of important areas in which we require clarity from the Government in relation to the deal it has agreed with the European Union, and, in particular, the protocol. In terms of trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, which, of course, is of vital importance to everyone, we must have unfettered access to the Great Britain market.

The Prime Minister promised that this would be the case throughout his campaign for re-election, and he must deliver on his promise.

It is essential that our businesses do not face additional barriers to trade, such as tariffs, administrative costs or delays, and that their competitiveness be maintained. Specifically, we welcome the commitment from our Government that they will ensure that Northern Ireland

remains part of the United Kingdom internal market; that legislation will be in place to guarantee unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses to the whole of the UK; and that that will be in force for 1 January 2021. We will now be engaging with the Government to ensure that that is delivered in the necessary time frame.

As I have acknowledged already, our businesses have raised concerns about the potential for discrimination against Northern Ireland goods and businesses accessing the GB market, particularly if there should be regulatory divergence in future. To grow the economy in Northern Ireland, our businesses need clarity, and we will be strong in pressing the Government to provide that throughout the process as we exit the European Union. It is also essential that trade can continue in both directions and that Great Britain businesses are not discouraged from operating in Northern Ireland due to new burdens.

The various committees outlined in the protocol will play a very important role, and the decisions that they take will have a long-lasting consequence for Northern Ireland. We have secured a commitment that our representatives will be part of any UK delegations in any meetings of the UK/EU specialised or joint committees discussing Northern Ireland-specific matters, and those meetings are also being attended by the Republic of Ireland's Government as part of the European Union's delegation. It is only right that we are included in those discussions, and we will ensure that our views are properly presented to the relevant decision makers.

Despite having secured numerous commitments and guarantees from the Government, we are still of the view that the deal that is being pursued by the UK Government poses significant challenges for Northern Ireland, because it should be for the Assembly to legislate for matters within our competence. That is the way that it should be. We have brought forward the motion today to seek agreement from the Assembly that it does not give its consent to the request from the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

The letter from the Secretary of State, Steve Barclay, and the details of the clauses have been provided to Members. Given the very limited time that we have to respond and the expectation that the Government are going to proceed with the Bill, I suggest that our debate should focus on the issue of principle rather than attempt to scrutinise the detailed clauses, albeit I cannot order Members what to say. It will be a matter that we take a stand on, as a newly restored Assembly, to show that we are back in business and representing the views of our constituents, and that our views and policies should be respected and not overruled by the UK Parliament.

I recognise that if debate on the Bill goes ahead tomorrow in the House of Lords, there is limited time for it to take account of our views. However, the deputy First Minister and I felt that it was very important that the Assembly be given the opportunity to air those views, and that is why we brought the motion to the House. Again, I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and the Business Committee that we could not do so in a timelier manner. We look forward, Mr Speaker, to receiving your letter on the issue.

To sum up, I commend the motion to the Assembly. I hope that it gives Members the opportunity to air their views on the issue, and I look forward to the debate.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I will speak briefly as the Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office. For obvious reasons, there has not been any Committee consideration of the devolved provisions included in the withdrawal agreement Bill, so there is no Committee position. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that had the Committee been in place, there would have been significant scrutiny under the legislative consent procedure of those provisions that alter the competence of the Assembly. As the First Minister has outlined, that has not been possible, meaning that the way in which the issue is being dealt with today has been unavoidable, and we understand that. However, I am confident also, given the cross-Northern Ireland party support in Westminster for the amendments to the Bill, that the motion would have been supported by all the parties there as well as those that do not take their seats or that do not have seats there.

1.15 pm

Speaking in my capacity as an MLA, I call for the rejection of consent for the Bill. Across the North, over the last three years, Brexit has sharpened all the lines that the Good Friday Agreement helped to soften on borders, sovereignty and identity. We should have spent the last three years, since June 2016, talking about tackling poverty, creating opportunity and reconciling our island, but instead we have talked exclusively about Brexit — a problem that did not need to exist and that we did not consent to.

We in the SDLP have been proudly pro-European since our foundation almost 50 years ago. Our founder, John Hume, talked about the European Union as the world's greatest peace process, and our European identity has been woven through the politics of the SDLP ever since. We campaigned hard against Brexit, and we do not believe that there is a good version of Brexit. Although we believe firmly that nothing is as good as remaining, this deal is particularly challenging and destructive for people in the North. It does not protect our interests in the way that the backstop would have done, and it has united Members across the House in opposition.

There are various political views and positions on Brexit, but there is collective agreement that any hindrance to trade, east or west, is not good for business here and will introduce an additional layer of bureaucracy that business can ill afford to manage. It is positive that, albeit for our different motivations, we have a collective political voice on this matter in the House, and we can show our political maturity on the issue by setting the politics aside and working together for the business community out there. I hope that this sends a positive message to them.

The withdrawal Bill is laced with uncertainty and ambiguity, and there is a clear lobby from the business sector here that it wants just the opposite: it wants to know exactly how business will be transacted. In the absence of such clarity, it has worries, and we share in those worries and concerns.

Politically, we believe that Brexit, in whatever form, is not good for Ireland. The overwhelming consensus on the imposition of borders, be they fiscal or trade, hard or soft, is that they are not good. We must do all that we can to mitigate the worst excesses of Brexit and ensure that we are on the side of business and trade sectors. They have been a powerful voice of reality in the midst of much noise of late, but we must now focus on their needs.

I hope that the withholding of our consent for the Bill will send a message to the British Tory Government that we do not agree with it and that it must be improved. I hope that such a collective rejection of the Bill here will send the message to Prime Minister Johnson that we want that unfettered access for trade and no imposition of additional borders, costs or delays when conducting trade from the North.

Mr Stalford: I am tempted to open with, “As I was saying, before I was interrupted three years ago”, but maybe it is too soon. It is important that we state on the record in the House what the Prime Minister himself said:

“If we wanted to vary ... regulation, then we would have to leave Northern Ireland behind as an economic semi-colony of the EU. We would be damaging the fabric of the union.”

Those are the words of the Prime Minister, spoken before he became Prime Minister, when he was denouncing Theresa May for the content of her withdrawal agreement and yet — and yet — the aegis that he warned against is exactly that which he now proposes to sign this part of the United Kingdom up to. In those circumstances, it is absolutely right that the House should say that we are not prepared to tolerate such a situation.

During the absence of devolution, there have been many twists and turns in the Brexit process. Even in Northern Ireland, over the course of devolution being down, we have had three Secretaries of State and two Prime Ministers, but, from a DUP perspective, we have had one guiding principle on Brexit: Northern Ireland must leave the European Union on the same basis as the rest of the United Kingdom. When a border up the Irish Sea was suggested, Theresa May and Boris Johnson stated that that was a prospect that no British Prime Minister could sign up to. I call upon Boris, therefore, to maintain his word and his consistency, and it is important that, going forward, the Executive adopt a collective approach to make sure that that is the case.

The Prime Minister should be congratulated. I think this is the first time, certainly in my living memory, that I have seen the Northern Ireland Assembly as united on an issue in rejecting the content and withholding its consent for the content of the treaty that he signed up to. This deal is bad for Northern Ireland economically because it hives us off from our single biggest market, and it will be the responsibility of the Executive going forward to ensure that there are no barriers to east-west trade. I want to see the outcome of the referendum delivered, but Northern Ireland cannot be a dowry for delivering Brexit for Great Britain, and the Prime Minister needs to be made very much aware of that.

I believe in devolution. I believe that devolution is worth having, and it helps us to address the unique circumstances that exist in Northern Ireland, and we have to work together in order to do that. Attempting to shunt this piece of legislation through without the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly runs contrary to everything that my Rt Hon friend the First Minister said pertains in the Sewel convention.

I will finish my remarks with a quote from the First Minister:

“On Brexit, we will not give support to the government when we believe they are fundamentally wrong and acting in a way that is detrimental to Northern Ireland

and taking us in the wrong direction. We will oppose them and we will use our votes ...

Let me say clearly from this platform today”

that we do not support a deal that does not work for Northern Ireland as well as the whole of the United Kingdom.

That is our position, and we have maintained it consistently throughout this process. The Prime Minister, for whatever reason, may have chosen to change his position, but we will not. It is essential that all parties now pull together to defend the economic interests of Northern Ireland and to defend our businesses and our traders, all of whom will be damaged or hurt if the vision outlined by the Prime Minister comes to pass.

On behalf of our party, I am clear in saying that we want to work with everyone to ensure the best possible outcome in this, the defining political issue of our age.

Mr Murphy: It has been an interesting debate so far in that we find ourselves in partial agreement with each other. In the contributions so far there has been a clear recognition of the damage that Brexit can do to here. What a pity that that recognition, which was first put in a joint letter from the current First Minister and the late deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, did not become the consistent position over the last three years, because I think we are now back at that place where we recognise that the Brexit ambitions of the British Government are damaging to the people we represent here.

This has been a divisive debate ever since that. I sincerely hope we can get back to that, but one consistent point through it all has been that the majority of the people in this jurisdiction are opposed to Brexit. They stated so in the referendum, and they have stated so in numerous elections since and in numerous opinion polls, and the position continues to be, if it is not even stronger, that people are opposed to Brexit. I think they did so because there is a broad recognition across the community, as has been expressed today, that the idea that has been pursued by a British Government is damaging to our interests. Leaving the European Union is not in the interests of the people who live here.

The EU guarantees rights, it facilitates a soft border and it underpins the all-Ireland economy. We are EU-critical, unlike our colleagues here. There is much wrong with the European Union — much wrong in its approach, its desire to centralise things and its desire to have common defence and common foreign policies. There are many things about the European Union that we disagree with, and we use our position within the European Parliament and as elected representatives here to oppose some of the direction of the European Union, but there is no doubt that, overall, membership of the European Union has been good for this island and continues to be good for this island.

It is part of the identity particularly of the younger generation who see themselves very much as European, as well as whatever particular identities they hold on this island.

It is also important to remember, at a time when we are struggling to get the British Government to live up to the financial commitments that it made as part of the deal to resurrect these institutions, that the EU is a significant contributor to our public finances. CAP payments alone

amounted to £2.1 billion between 2014 and 2020. They are vital for keeping many of our farms sustainable. We have, I am sure, many large farms, but the vast bulk of people involved in farming in this part of Ireland are small farmers who are very much reliant on EU subsidies to keep those farms viable. We have some limited guarantee, I think, until 2021 in relation to the future of similar spend that CAP would provide, but nothing beyond that and there is a huge question mark in the agricultural and farming community over how sustainable small farms will be on the other side of a reduction of all of that.

There is also, of course, INTERREG funding, which has been hugely important, particularly in border areas. Both sides of the border were neglected during almost 70 years of partition with respect to investment, particularly in infrastructure. Infrastructure investment has led to economic advantage growing for people in the border communities, communities that were practically ignored throughout the history of both states on this island. Infrastructure funds from Europe also contributed to the opening up of the border following entry into the single market and the customs union, and there are the competitive funds, all of which have been jeopardedised by Brexit.

We are told that there is some guarantee in relation to the Peace funding, which is specific to the Six Counties and the six border counties as well. I sincerely hope that that continues because, again, in the absence of the peace dividend that we were promised in 1998 — history repeats itself somehow — that has been very important in helping communities that suffered as a consequence of the conflict. Communities on the other side of the border suffered from that lack of investment that I talked about in relation to INTERREG funding. It allowed those people to access funding which had not previously been agreed to.

Those are all hugely important and that is why, when the Brexit issue came up, we joined forces with the SDLP, the Alliance Party and the Greens. We opposed Brexit; we made sure that our voices were heard in Europe; and we worked through our MEPs and with the Irish Government. We made sure that the interests of the people that we represent were on the agenda for the European Union, because they were not on the agenda for the British Government.

We will continue to oppose Brexit. It is important that the Assembly rejects the Brexit propositions of the British Government. We do not consent to them. We continue to represent the best interests of the people because we know that our interests are not in any way featuring in the British Government's approach to Brexit. English nationalist interests dominate that agenda, and it is important that we continue to reject that with every voice that we have.

Mr Nesbitt: I retain significant sympathy for Mr Allister's position that we are being forced to vote on a binary proposition, which actually leaves us with no choice. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that we will have to support today's motion, but we do so hoping that the idea that we are in a new decade with a new approach will be reflected with perhaps some humility by some Members and parties in the Chamber. If that is too much of an ask, perhaps at least with some acknowledgement that previous confidences were based on pretty shallow ground.

In 2016, before the collapse of devolution, in a debate on Brexit, Mr Poots made it very clear that:

"we are in a negotiation period and that negotiation will be led by our national Government. I am proud to be part of the United Kingdom and to put my faith in our national Government ... We will be involved in those negotiations and will deal with Theresa May, David Davis, Boris Johnson and the key people" — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 117, p103, col 1].

So well dealt with that we are now about to vote against one of the key proposals from our national Government.

1.30 pm

That debate was on our document 'A Vision for Northern Ireland outside the EU', which was rejected by the House. The document said that we should deliver a positive vision for the people of Northern Ireland post-Brexit; that we should have a war room with skills and capacity to game the policy options; and that we should define our key asks of Her Majesty's Government.

The first key ask was to triple infrastructure investment. It was derided and pooh-poohed by the House, but here we are in 2020, and one of the key priorities for the UK Government is what? Investment in infrastructure: we are to benefit to the tune of £1 billion through the Barnett consequential because of investment in infrastructure. Yet, interestingly, in deriding the notion, given that he is now the Finance Minister, it was Conor Murphy whose criticism of our document was this:

"It is predicated on the generosity of the British Government" — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 117, p99, col 2].

What a pity he did not remember those words when he was negotiating New Decade, New Approach.

Let me diverge for a second, Mr Speaker, just to put this on record because many people are asking why the smaller parties did not ensure the financial package was right for New Decade, New Approach. The Ulster Unionist Party was halfway through its first read of the document when Secretary of State Smith and Tánaiste Coveney were briefing the media. We had no opportunity because we had been closed out.

By the way, another key ask of our document, just to put it back on the record, was:

"No 'hard border' at Great Britain's ports and airports".

We remain the region of the United Kingdom most affected by Brexit, and we remain the least prepared. The longer it goes on, the more Theresa May's famous "Brexit means Brexit" quote is as meaningless as lunch means lunch, but it seems that, for Northern Ireland, lunch increasingly looks like a ham and cheese sandwich from the local gas station; not three courses at one of our Michelin star restaurants.

Interestingly, Mr Stalford said in that debate back in 2016 that those of us in the Remain campaign were exhibiting:

"a public display of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, finally, acceptance." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 117, p94, col 2].

This motion is an acceptance of the failure to deliver on the promises of 2016.

In June 2016, Mrs Foster told the House that Brexit offered:

“the opportunity for ambition, innovation, flexibility and imagination.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 116, p22, col 2].

I, in the same debate, said that I feared, as a prophet of doom, that Brexit meant:

“an era of uncertainty, an uncertainty that will last years, not months.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 116, p1, col 2].

Three and a half years on, who was right?

Ms Armstrong: Alliance continues to be a pro-European party. We believe that Northern Ireland should be part of the EU and that there is no such thing as a good or sensible Brexit. Northern Ireland will be worse off under all Brexit scenarios. That said, we accept that Brexit is now inevitable in less than two weeks' time. We now need to focus on taking the rough edges off the Brexit deal and standing up and protecting Northern Ireland.

Our society works only on the basis of sharing and interdependence, yet all forms of Brexit entail some degree of friction, boundaries or borders. That risks creating a perception of winners and losers. Our economy is integrated for sales and supply chains on a North/South and east-west basis, and it is wrong to see either avenue being compromised.

The Theresa May deal provided a more credible soft landing. By contrast, the Johnson deal is much more challenging. Northern Ireland does need a special deal to address our particular circumstances. We should not fear Northern Ireland being different; the core challenge is how that difference is managed.

The withdrawal Bill itself raises a number of problems. First, there is uncertainty that a trade deal with the EU or a wider future relationship can be reached within the next 11 months. At best, this might be a mere fig leaf. It creates a significant risk of a no-deal outcome for the UK, with particular implications for us here in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, the nature of that future relationship is unclear. The Chancellor stressed recently that the UK will not actively align with the EU. This will have implications for any Irish Sea interface.

Thirdly, the Bill has a significant impact on devolved powers and competencies. This is the main thrust of the motion from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Fourthly, and related to that, there is set to be extensive use of the so-called Henry VIII powers and other deleted powers granted to UK Ministers to shape outcomes without accountability and scrutiny.

The passing of the motion by the Assembly is set to be constitutionally significant. We have been asked by the UK Government to pass a legislative consent motion as is required under the Sewel convention. The Assembly is set to say no. The Scottish Parliament has already said no. We have heard that the Welsh Assembly is to debate it tomorrow. However, the UK Government are set to proceed regardless. Moreover, there are many unresolved

issues for Northern Ireland. The cross-party group's joint amendment, which was not permitted, sought to capture and address many of those issues. Positively, we have seen some progress via UK commitments to Northern Ireland's being represented on the joint committee and the specialised Committee when it is being discussed and to legislate to guarantee unfettered access from Northern Ireland to Great Britain. However, it is unclear how both of these commitments will be met in practice. The UK Government need to go further and give commitments on the specific points in the amendment. We hope to bring that forward at some other stage.

It is worth making some points in the wider context. First, we should not tolerate a trade-off between some sort of interface on the island of Ireland or having the interface down the Irish Sea. Secondly, the focus of current debate is largely on the interface between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. However, the Great Britain to Northern Ireland interface is just as important and, indeed, more complicated. Its nature largely depends on the nature of the free trade agreement. Indications here, so far, are not good, but even a more benign free trade agreement is not the same as a customs union and a single market. Thirdly, there is an ambiguity on Northern Ireland's future trade relationships. Rather than having what could have originally been a foot in both camps, we could now end up being marginal in both the UK and EU arrangements. Finally, it is important that the shape of the future relationship covers not just goods but services and the movement of people.

In conclusion, there is a gap between the rhetoric, declarations and promises of the UK Ministers and reality. Therefore, Alliance confirms its support for the motion. We do not agree to the Assembly's giving its consent.

Mr Givan: I support the motion tabled by the Executive Office. The referendum that was held on the EU was a UK-wide referendum. It has been debated at length. Indeed, we could spend time rehearsing the old arguments and seeking to have another battle on an issue that has now been completed. We are best to spend our energy looking to the future and how we can deal with the new reality that we face. I of course accept that Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. However, that was part of a UK national question. We must accept that, given our place in the United Kingdom.

During the discussions that have taken place, a lot of focus, understandably, was on the relationships on an all-Ireland basis and the implications for the movement of people and trade, North/South, on the island. A lot of attention was paid to that by civic society, business groups, different interested stakeholders and, indeed, nationalist politicians. My concern at the time was that viewing the relationships and the outworking of Brexit through a nationalistic constitutional lens would then lead to the problems that we now encounter as a result of the withdrawal Bill. The Bill ensures that there will be no friction between North and South and that those trading relationships will be able to continue. However, there are now issues for the east-west dimension to our trading relationship.

When we look at the Northern Ireland protocol that is contained in the withdrawal Bill, it causes my party concern. Northern Ireland will be required to align with single market regulations. There will be enforcement and

compliance carried out by the European Commission and the European Court of Justice. These are issues that will not be faced elsewhere in the United Kingdom, in Great Britain. We will have a dual-tariff regime in place, because the joint committee that is being established as a result of the Northern Ireland protocol requires goods to be identified as being at risk. So, where there is trade, east-west, if there is a risk that that could then end up in the European Union, a tariff will have to be paid for that. That, inevitably, requires checks and compliance to be carried out. That will put increased burdens on our business community.

When I look at the consent mechanism that is built in as to how we will ever extract ourselves from this new relationship, it turns the Belfast Agreement on its head. I note that the UK Government's justification for this is that it is an international agreement, and, therefore, the consent mechanism does not need to be the same as it is in this House when it comes to dealing with controversial domestic issues. That consent mechanism is going to build in tension in this place. Not immediately, but further down the line in the years ahead, there will be problems for this House as to how that consent mechanism is —

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: — to be carried out. I will give way.

Mr McCrossan: First, I welcome the Member back to the House and congratulate him on his recent appointment. Will the Member agree that Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, and the Tory Government can obviously not be trusted when it comes to these matters of debate in relation to Northern Ireland's future in the European Union and also general matters in relation to this place, as we have seen from most recent behaviour?

Mr Givan: The Member brings me on to my final point. The Prime Minister has made commitments, given the context that I have set out, about the concerns that we have around the implications for east-west and how that will interface for Northern Ireland businesses. The Prime Minister has made an unwavering commitment to Northern Ireland. He said:

"This new deal in this Bill ensures that the United Kingdom will leave the EU whole and entire, with an unwavering dedication to Northern Ireland's place in our Union."

The Prime Minister also indicated that we will have "unfettered access" when it comes to trade.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute because of that intervention.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Speaker. The Prime Minister also indicated that we will have "unfettered access". So words have been made clear by the Prime Minister that we could take comfort from, and commitments made in the Conservative manifesto to that effect. However, in the Bill, there is no mention of unfettered access. It does not exist. The regulations to facilitate access to the GB market for Northern Ireland say that Ministers "may" regulate. They do not say "must". That is why our party, with the support of other parties, brought forward amendments, and I put on record my appreciation to those parties that tabled amendments to seek to put the requirement to regulate for

unfettered access in the withdrawal Bill. That, however, was rejected by the House of Commons.

Those commitments by the Prime Minister and by the UK Government need to be given legal effect. They need to bite when it comes to the future relationship for Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom, and also for that North/South dimension. I want the best of both worlds. That is good for our politics, it is good for our people and it is good for our businesses, but there needs to be much more work carried out to ensure that it happens.

Dr Archibald: In supporting the motion to reject consent, it is important to continually emphasise that we are being dragged out of the European Union against the democratically expressed wishes of the majority of the people of the North. In fact, on a number of occasions since 2016, that rejection of Brexit has been reaffirmed, most recently in the European elections in May, when two out of three MEPs elected were pro-Remain, and in the Westminster election last month, when the majority of MPs elected were anti-Brexit.

The withdrawal agreement between the European Union and the British Government contains the protocol on Ireland, which gives some certainty to preventing a hard border on the island of Ireland, but it is far from an ideal arrangement and, no matter what is agreed before the end of this year, it will be suboptimal to what we currently enjoy.

The sections of the withdrawal agreement referring to the North are as noteworthy for the lack of detail as for what they actually contain. It is unclear how the customs and VAT arrangements will actually work, and, of course, much depends on the trading arrangements that are still to be negotiated. At the weekend, however, the British Chancellor, Sajid Javid, commenting on regulatory divergence, said:

"There will not be alignment, we will not be a rule taker, we will not be in the single market and we will not be in the customs union".

If those comments are anything to go by, there is likely to be a considerable negative impact, particularly so for businesses and those that rely on regulatory alignment, such as our agri-food sector.

1.45 pm

The British Chancellor then had the audacity to suggest that businesses should be prepared for the imminent changes, despite the continuing absence of clarity on the conditions under which they will be trading. It is important at this point that we pay tribute to all the representative bodies from across the North — business, trade unions, farming organisations, and the community and voluntary sector — that have come together over the past couple of years to speak with a clear and united voice about the need to protect the interests of the North, because what is clear is that, regardless of its outcome, Brexit is going to have a detrimental impact across every sector of our society for many years to come. When we hear comments such as those of the British Chancellor, we know that it is clear that he has little thought for the impact on his own economy, never mind ours. When we add to that the disgraceful bad faith displayed by the British Government over their financial commitments to the New Decade, New Approach deal, is it any wonder that more and more

people are coming to realise that the British Government have no positive contribution to make to our future well-being and prosperity?

Mr Middleton: I join colleagues in supporting the motion tabled by the Executive Office. We are now three years on from the referendum having taken place and since the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Of course, as democrats, we strongly believe that the result of the referendum should be delivered and that the voice of the electorate should be respected. Today is very much a welcome opportunity for all of us here in the Chamber to give our views and perspective, particularly on giving consent to the UK Government.

My party has long held, and continues to hold, the view that Northern Ireland and the entire UK will have a bright future outside the European Union. It was the New Decade, New Approach agreement that brought the House back. In that agreement, the UK Government made a number of commitments, which can be summarised in four broad points. The UK Government have already committed to ensuring that there is a new deal for Northern Ireland as we leave the EU, maximising trade opportunities and investment. There is a commitment that Northern Ireland will remain an integral part of the UK internal market and that it will remain in the UK customs territory. There is a further commitment to legislate to guarantee unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses to the whole of the UK internal market, with legislation in force for 1 January 2021. Finally, there is an aim to maximise the free flow of trade and a commitment to ensure that Northern Ireland businesses benefit from the UK's new free trade agreements signed with other countries.

All of that is very much welcome, but it is disappointing that, when MPs from this place joined together just days ago in the House of Commons and put forward amendments that would have ensured that access was truly unfettered on the movement of goods on both an east-west and west-east basis, those were opposed and not allowed to progress by the Government.

The checks as proposed would lead to greater burdens for trade between GB and Northern Ireland, and, consequentially, they would have a negative impact for consumers. Despite the fact that Northern Ireland trades more significantly with GB than it does with the Republic of Ireland, the EU and the rest of the world combined, the current proposals would see our east-west trade being subject to the rules of the EU customs union, notwithstanding the fact that Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK customs territory.

The Prime Minister has described his withdrawal agreement as being "oven-ready", but it is very clear from the Chamber and from business and stakeholders that there is no appetite for the current withdrawal agreement. For our part, the Democratic Unionist Party will continue to work to shape a solution in Northern Ireland's interests. It is important that the new Northern Ireland Executive are represented on the UK delegations to the EU.

Finally, as at every stage of the process, the Democratic Unionist Party will judge each situation on what is best for Northern Ireland economically and constitutionally within the Union.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that this is the first opportunity for Karen Mullan to speak as a private Member

and that it is the convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption.

Ms Mullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I speak in support of the motion.

The EU/British Brexit deal undoubtedly contains essential protections for the island of Ireland, preventing any hardening of the border, but, in reality, it is the least-worst option because there is no good Brexit. The majority of people here voted to remain in the EU. We do not support Brexit, and we do not consent to Brexit. In addition, although the Brexit mitigations for Ireland in the withdrawal agreement are essential, we still need greater protections for young people and, indeed, all of us who are EU citizens.

I want to focus on education and the implications of Brexit for our young people. Last Wednesday in the House of Commons, 344 MPs voted against a clause that would have required the British Government to negotiate continuing full membership of the ERASMUS programme after Brexit. The ERASMUS scheme is an EU programme that afforded our students the opportunity to study in other countries. The impact of Brexit on education will remove that option and will mean that people from the North will have to pay higher tuition fees if they wish to attend university in the EU. Such changes could put university attendance out of the financial reach of many of our young people.

Among students, young people, those in training and staff who work in the education sector, there is no doubt that the ERASMUS scheme has been appreciated and is seen as beneficial for those who have availed themselves of it. At the end of the year, regardless of a trade deal, that option will be gone. The ERASMUS programme has been acknowledged as a tremendous success for many young people, and I strongly argue that its benefits will be very difficult to replicate. Its loss will impact most on those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with medical needs or disabilities.

I urge Members to send a strong message to the British Government that they do not have our consent to remove our citizens from the European Union.

Ms Mallon: Brexit is the biggest challenge of our time and will affect generations to come across these islands. The politics of Brexit has dominated and consumed the past three years since the referendum on EU membership in 2016; time that should have been spent dealing with poverty, inequality, the crises in our health service and schools, and the climate emergency. I recognise that there are different views in the Chamber, from those who are passionately Remain to those who support Leave, but I wholeheartedly welcome the fact that, after three years, we are in the Chamber and are respectfully debating our differences rather than outside, engaged in megaphone diplomacy over the air waves.

There is no escaping the facts: 56% of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the European Union, and that vote has been reinforced with further support for Remain in subsequent European and Westminster elections. People understand and recognise that Brexit is the most significant economic, constitutional and social challenge that we face across these islands. Democratically, they have made their will clear again. People across the North are not prepared to suffer economic ruin, they are not prepared to accept the wholesale sell-off of our health service in a barter between

Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, nor are they prepared to accept declining food and environmental standards.

Today is our opportunity to reinforce the message of the electorate whom we represent. Today, we can and must give back a voice to the people of Northern Ireland. Today, we must send a united message to Boris Johnson and the UK Government, to Dublin and Brussels that, collectively, we reject the EU (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill. Today, we can choose not to be divided by our views on EU membership. Instead, we can choose to unite, respect those differences and together vote to reject the withdrawal Bill, because it does not protect the interests of all the people whom we represent.

Without question, the legislation offers nothing but economic self-harm and damage to the hard-won progress that we have made over 20 years. It opens old wounds and threatens business, investment and jobs. Critically, the legislation, as drafted, provides no certainty or security for our future. As the British Government have recklessly ruled out an extension to the transition period, there is still the threat of the possibility of a catastrophic no-deal Brexit.

It is not Boris Johnson and his Cabinet colleagues who will suffer as a result of that dangerous cliff edge; it will be communities, farmers and businesses right across Northern Ireland. Today, again, the SDLP calls on the British Government to immediately rule out any future threat of a no-deal Brexit.

People at home are rightly concerned. They know, given the catalogue of experiences to date, that the words of the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, cannot be trusted. Moving even beyond the falsehoods of the Vote Leave campaign, following his election to office, the Prime Minister ripped apart our insurance policy — the backstop — yet, today, his Government seek our consent for this EU withdrawal agreement, which will leave the North clinging to a broken Brexit Britain, left to suffer its inevitable and punishing fate of economic self-harm without adequate protections. That is why SDLP MPs, with Alliance and DUP MPs, proposed a series of amendments in Westminster to protect all our interests. The Conservative Party may have a majority in the House of Commons, but that does not remove power and responsibility from this place.

The SDLP continues to believe that the best solution is for Northern Ireland to remain a full member of the European Union. As our former leader and civil rights champion John Hume put it:

“[The] European Union is the best example in the history of the world of conflict resolution”.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Mallon: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that, if that were the case, that would be a breach of the Belfast Agreement and Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom would be changed? Will she accept that even this proposal of Boris Johnson's is changing what was agreed and is not following the Belfast Agreement and that what she proposes will be opposed by unionists because we are part of the United Kingdom, even though we dislike what is proposed in Boris Johnson's deal?

Mr Speaker: The Member has a further minute.

Ms Mallon: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I thank the Member for his comments. As I go on, I will point out how the Good Friday Agreement is the answer to a lot of the challenges that we will see and presents the key to unlocking the opportunities.

For our communities, the European Union has provided support and stability. It has maximised rights and protected freedom to move across these islands. It has supported the Good Friday Agreement, ensuring that no —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Ms Mallon: Yes.

Mr McGlone: Very briefly, on that point, as part of all that, we live and represent areas and communities where many other EU nationals live and work, and, in recognition of that very positive contribution to our society in our schools, our workplaces and all that, it is crucial that the rights and protections of those citizens be inserted into and enshrined in legislation too.

Ms Mallon: Yes, I very much agree with that point, and the SDLP maintains that the best protections and solutions to the challenges we now face are in the Good Friday Agreement and its three strands of relationships across these islands.

In closing, I urge Members across the Chamber to support the motion to withhold legislative consent. Whatever our views on membership of the European Union, our job now is to unite in common purpose to best protect people.

Mr Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Ms Mallon: We have already seen collective leadership from politicians of all parties in one approach with the business community in Westminster. That approach must continue.

Dr Aiken: I echo the comments made by everybody else today, and I will support the motion on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

The comments from the Chancellor at the weekend in the 'Financial Times' underpin how much Northern Ireland is now likely to diverge from the rest of our country. The implications, particularly on the Irish Sea border, are significant. However, no one seems to really care about what the practical implications of that may be; indeed, in the discussions the party leaders had with the Secretary of State less than a week ago, when we were sitting around the table, nobody seemed to be aware of the significance of the changes that will occur. Nobody seemed to understand the quantum and the amount of work and effort that needs to go into trying to achieve where we are going to; indeed, earlier last week, our conversations with senior EU and UK political leaders showed that Northern Ireland is rapidly sliding down the priority list. There is little or no focus on making this agreement work, and that has massive potential political costs and may lead to regulation being passed on to our businesses, our consumers and our agriculture and fishing sectors. Unfortunately, the implications of all this were and are sadly predictable.

2.00 pm

The withdrawal Bill puts the withdrawal agreement into UK law. The withdrawal agreement will affect Northern Ireland in perpetuity when it is passed, not just in relation to the

EU but in relation to the rest of our country. The withdrawal Bill is legislation that will be built on in future in order to manage the domestic implications of this protocol. That can be expected to take the form of statutory instruments that the Government will lay down. Northern Ireland will have little influence and virtually absolutely no hope of annulling them.

The withdrawal Bill provides extraordinary power to the UK Executive over areas of potential devolved competence. The power of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly is directly constrained by the Bill. It is notable that the concerns that have been expressed by the business community and the political parties and that were given considerable cross-party support in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document do not seem to have been supported by what has been going on in Westminster, particularly by the Government. Although there is a welcome and considerable step forward, particularly, in the New Decade, New Approach deal and the approach from all the parties, that mainly took the form of Government commitments to consult. Who here believes that the current British Government will do much in the way of consulting? How that is to be done and whether it will enable Northern Ireland views to be taken into account as the UK implements its protocols and in the negotiations of the future UK/EU relationship is, to say the least, unclear.

There are some practical issues. We need to see the rapid creation of the Brexit subcommittee that was talked about in the deal last week. In parallel, we need to establish a ministerial-level lead to coordinate with the other regions. We need to have representation at the JMC and to build a Northern Ireland case in London, Brussels and further afield. There is an opportunity here, First and deputy First Ministers, to build a full partnership approach, a partnership on behalf of Northern Ireland between the political parties, the representatives of the business community, the third sector, the Civil Service and relevant academic research. We can all come together. First and deputy First Ministers, quite frankly, there is little appetite in the EU, London or Dublin to deliver what is best for us in Northern Ireland. The only way we can make these changes and influence this is if we all join together and make it happen. First Minister and deputy First Minister, you have a significant task ahead of you. We, in the Ulster Unionist Party, will be willing to support it, but we need to get on with it, and we need to get on with it now.

Mr O'Dowd: It would be tempting, in the debate, to reflect on the events of the last three years, on where mistakes and errors have been made and where opportunities have been missed. While I may drift into that territory at some stages, through no fault of my own, we have to learn from the past to make sure that we do not make similar mistakes in future because, as the Taoiseach — or the current Taoiseach — reminded everyone last week, this is only half-time. The general public, the business community, agriculture and all those people out there, for a variety of reasons, may have sighed a sigh of relief when Boris Johnson and the European Union's withdrawal Bill was signed off on, because they hoped that Brexit would no longer feature on our news programmes and political programmes and that progress had been made: the reality is the hardest bit is yet to come in relation to negotiating a trade deal.

The direct responsibility of the Assembly in all these matters is somewhat limited, because, even though we have been assured that we will have representations on various delegations and committees etc, I and others sat on the Joint Ministerial Committee in European format in a previous life, and I have to say that they were the most frustrating meetings I ever attended. It was clear that those sitting across the table from us, the Welsh representatives and the Scottish representatives either did not care or did not know about the needs of the people we represented, and that is where we will continue to run into difficulties. So, the more unified and focused a voice we can garner in the Chamber and in the Executive, the better.

What we have to remember is this: Brexit did great harm and great violence to the relationships that had been built up over the last 10 to 15 years, following the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement, the establishment of the Executive and the Assembly and all those sorts of things. What we have to do — there is an opportunity through the most recent agreement — is to start rebuilding those relationships and realise that no one will defend our corner and the people we represent better than we can. No matter what your opinion is on the Union, no matter what your opinion is on the reunification of Ireland, the experience of the last three years has shown us that we will have to stand up for ourselves. Otherwise, we will be run roughshod into deals that do great harm to our economy and to future relationships across the island of Ireland.

There is a variety of reasons why Members and political parties are voting against the withdrawal agreement today. There is an argument and a rationale behind them all, but let us focus on the next stage in all these issues and try to get a common cause. I do not want a hard border down the Irish Sea, now or in the future, because it serves no benefit to the economy on the island of Ireland, the North or whatever you want to call it. It has no benefit. I want to see a future united Ireland, but I want to trade with our nearest neighbours, because that makes economic sense. We are socially, economically and culturally inextricably linked, going into the future, and we do not want to break any of those relationships. We have to get a deal that ensures trade between us and Britain. We have to get a deal that ensures trade between us and the European Union. The reality on this island is that, when you go along the border corridor, the European Union is the next hedgerow. It is the next field, the next laneway, the next road and the next business. That is the reality of what many representing the British Cabinet when meeting us a number of years ago at the Joint Ministerial Committee did not even recognise, did not understand and, in my opinion, did not care about. Mr Givan said that the politics of Brexit became focused through a nationalist lens, but he was talking about the wrong nationalist lens: it was always about what English nationalism needed rather than what everybody else required to move forward.

As for where we go next, the best way forward is for the Assembly and the Executive to work together to represent the people to ensure that citizens' rights, workers' rights, trade and all those things —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Dowd: — are protected and secured going into the future.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion. I emphasise that I do so as a democrat, but we must nevertheless reflect that much of what was pledged by the Leave campaign has not turned out the way the public were told it would. There has been no easy trade deal, no extra money for public services, and a weakened sterling has contributed to rising costs of living. Despite all of that, I argue that it is away from pure trade and pure finance that the biggest risks from Brexit are to be found. That is another reason why I endorse Dr Farry's recent comments in the House of Commons that future arrangements must have the consent of the devolved legislatures that will bear so many of the consequences of them. I remind the House, with particular regard to health, as that is my brief, that, when it comes to arrangements on the future relationships between the UK and the EU, we need to see detailed and realistic proposals for cooperation.

With regard to workforce issues in Health and Social Care Northern Ireland, we are still without any reassurance that reciprocal arrangements will enable health workers from other EU countries to continue to work in Northern Ireland. Additionally, direct access to a labour market of over 500 million people is of value not just to our health service but to the vital health research ongoing in Northern Ireland, not least in the cancer research centre in my constituency. We also need agreement on mutual standards, not least to enable people in Northern Ireland to continue to seek treatment elsewhere, including through all-Ireland partnerships, such as that for congenital heart conditions, or for rare conditions right across Europe. We need to see detail from the UK Government on how they will ensure mutual access and recognition so that people from elsewhere in the EU can continue to provide vital care and research here.

It is concerning, therefore, to see that one early step of the UK Government was to withdraw, in effect, from the Erasmus programmes; in fact, reciprocal programmes, research projects and even trade missions are vital to ensure that we have the most up-to-date healthcare knowledge that we can with regard to treatment, medicine and even diagnostic equipment. We do not even have a guarantee on reciprocal arrangements concerning the E111 European healthcare insurance card, meaning that people resident in the UK may have to pay for treatment elsewhere, something that would be grossly unfair, in particular to those with rare conditions that cannot be met here in the UK. Many have a justified concern that they will, for example, be blocked from international clinical trials.

There is also a concern that a race to the bottom on standards will include standards on food safety and environmental regulation, which have a direct impact on population health. There is also the direct issue for local pharmaceutical firms that have access to EU markets. They will need to be unfettered. As we have seen, many have already started to set up bases in the Republic of Ireland, which results in a direct shift in labour and job opportunities across the border. Mutual agreement on medicine standards would be of interest to both our well-being and our economy.

Whether we are faced with the worst-case scenario or even the best case, we still need time to improve our data collection and dissemination, workforce contingency plans and communication requirements, given the complexity of the issues that will arise on 1 January next

year in health alone. Even something as simple as the reciprocal recognition of driving licences, for example for our ambulance drivers, across the border needs to be secured, right through to grave issues such as our ability to adequately access data and intelligence to combat sexual exploitation.

That is a brief outline of some of the issues arising in just one area about which the European withdrawal Bill is, effectively, silent and on which we have still no serious guidance from the UK Government. That is true whether we voted Leave, Remain or not at all. For that reason, I urge unanimous support for the motion.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, and I now call Matthew O'Toole. I remind the House that this is the Member's maiden speech.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Thank you for reminding everyone of that. I congratulate you, first of all, on your appointment. You are an experienced Chair; I am an extremely inexperienced Member, so I hope to call on you for your advice in the months ahead.

What do we know about Brexit? We know it has been deeply divisive in Northern Ireland and across these islands. That is why unity of purpose in this place today is so important, and unity of message from the Assembly. We also know that it is definitely happening. On 31 January, by automatic force of law, the UK, including Northern Ireland, will leave the EU. That is why it is important that we send a message now about this withdrawal agreement Bill and what the Assembly thinks of it, which is that the Assembly does not give its consent.

I am in the unique, slightly strange position of actually having been a civil servant in the UK Government when the Brexit vote happened and in the period afterwards. In many ways, the reason I am here now is my frustrations at the dilemma that Brexit has imposed on our island, particularly Northern Ireland, without its consent. It was clear long before the 2016 referendum that leaving the European Union would put Northern Ireland's unique situation at risk because of our land border with the EU but also because of the complex web of identity and history that links this place — the Assembly is, in many ways, a manifestation of that complexity — to the rest of Ireland and the rest of the UK.

I also accept, even though I profoundly disagree with them, that many in the Chamber believe in leaving the European Union. It is clear that this deal — this withdrawal Bill — is rejected not only by those who rejected Brexit in the North, which, as we know and as Members have reflected, is the majority, but by those who supported Brexit, including others in the Chamber. I acknowledge, as others have done, that the, in a sense, rejection of the withdrawal Bill is for slightly different reasons, and we should not be shy about admitting that.

However, we have today the opportunity to do something important: to show unity of purpose in rejecting the withdrawal agreement Bill.

2.15 pm

For the past three years, the UK Government have said that the voice of all Northern Ireland's representatives — the voice of the Assembly — should be heard and that the Assembly should reconvene in order to enable that

to happen. Well, we are here now, and if the Assembly rejects the Bill, as we expect it to, then no Minister in London can claim that there is any doubt over the view of Northern Ireland's representatives.

A few people have mentioned Sajid Javid's comments in the press over the weekend about the UK abandoning alignment. It is worth saying that every time a UK Government Minister decides that the UK is going to diverge from EU rules, they are making a decision that will lead to further divergence in the Irish Sea. It is really important to put that point on the record. People who are concerned about divergence in the Irish Sea should be considering decisions that Tory Ministers in London are making about divergence from EU rules. We should send that message as well today.

As someone who passionately supported efforts to avoid a hardening of the border in Ireland — it is part of the reason why I am here now — I see no contradiction in also saying to the British Government, for which I not so long ago worked, that they have a responsibility to live up to their commitments in minimising disruption of goods as they move between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. That is what parties across the Assembly have attempted to do at Westminster. We have talked a little bit today about the amendments that were tabled at Westminster and which had cross-party support, with the support and advice of the business community, in the last few weeks.

There will be further votes on amendments like that in the days ahead. I hope, for that reason, that we can send a clear message from this place that the parties here are also unified in supporting unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses in Great Britain and in keeping the UK Government to their pledges in living up to that. At the moment we have assurances from UK Ministers but, with respect to them, people from all parties in the Assembly have reason to question the value of guarantees from the Prime Minister and his Ministers.

In the years ahead, we will be debating exactly how the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol works and exactly how it affects Northern Ireland and our island. Today, colleagues have gone through in detail the vast range of areas in which life and policy will be affected in Northern Ireland. It is, quite simply, bewildering. That is why it is really important that, today, we send a clear message that the Assembly does not consent to the detail of the withdrawal agreement Bill, nor does it consent to the Brexit that is being offered. The vital thing that we can do today is to send a very clear message to Westminster that Northern Ireland and its Assembly, when it comes to the withdrawal agreement Bill, says no. I commend the motion.

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the motion. I do not consent to a border being drawn down the Irish Sea, with the additional bureaucracy that will flow with it, both in regulations and in differences between ourselves and the rest of the United Kingdom, which, I highlight, is our biggest market, particularly for our agri-food industry. We must ensure that difficulties that could arise from the agreement are ironed out or avoided. Nevertheless, we all have to accept that a decision has been taken by the British people and by Parliament. That is the reality, whether you voted for or against Brexit. We must ensure that our economy, our people and our businesses are not adversely affected by the withdrawal agreement.

The agreement provides for the setting up of a joint committee, which is a new mechanism for regulations governing Northern Ireland to be established, bypassing the Assembly and Westminster. It will be made up of officials who are appointees from Europe and the UK, and it will determine how we are governed. That could have a very significant adverse effect if the practical outworkings of some of their decisions are not foreseen. It is therefore important that Northern Ireland and the Assembly have a significant input into the joint committee, yet there are no details and there has been no talk about how that will happen. We cannot agree on what is deemed to be the withdrawal agreement so far.

There are some very practical implications for businesses, and, indeed, for my constituency, at the port of Larne. What infrastructure will have to be built for additional inspections to take place? Will the car parks in Belfast, Larne and Warrenpoint be big enough? Will lorries be delayed? Will the agri-food industry, which moves time-sensitive products to supermarkets throughout the rest of the United Kingdom, be able to meet its contracts?

I previously visited a significant distribution point in my constituency and became aware of just how detailed and important time management is for the agri-food industry. If a container arrives late at a distribution point, it is rejected. The manufacturer then bears the cost because it has not met its contract. What would happen to our mushrooms, which have a very limited shelf life? I use mushrooms just as an example. Supermarkets want products with the maximum shelf life. If we have any delays, those will reduce the shelf life, and the industry may not be able to maintain its contracts. At the very least, there is potential for a reduction in the value of our agri-food products because they have a shorter shelf life. Therefore, we must ensure that there are no undue delays as our goods move to other markets.

There is then the whole issue of a customs border potentially being created for goods coming from Scotland to Northern Ireland. Will that put people off using that route for some of our goods? Alternatively, will supermarkets be forced to buy more expensive goods from elsewhere in the EU and the Republic, which is not what we are used to doing?

It is vital that we get engaged and do not sign up to anything without knowing the detail and without being fully aware of the adverse implications that the withdrawal agreement could have on our businesses, our people and our overall economy. It is for that reason that I am happy to support the motion and reject the proposed withdrawal agreement. There is a lot of work to do. We have to accept that this decision has been made, but we must try to mitigate and minimise disruption to our people and our businesses going forward.

Mr Speaker: I now welcome Sinead McLaughlin to make her maiden speech.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is an honour to be called to make my maiden speech, particularly on this very important issue. Before I speak in support of the motion, I hope that Members can allow me a small indulgence, because I want to talk about my city and my constituency.

First, it is my privilege to carry on the mandate of my predecessor and party leader, Colum Eastwood. Colum

is a superb politician, showing the value of properly representing the Foyle constituency in Westminster, for Derry and for all of Northern Ireland. I am proud of my party leader. The SDLP has new energy, but we stand on the shoulders of some of the greatest leaders in Ireland: John Hume and Séamus Mallon. We have a strong history of civil rights, as peacemakers and as Europeans. It is part of our DNA.

I am a Derry girl. I was born, was reared and raised a family in my home town. I love my people and my place in Derry. I am passionate about our city, which is full of potential. Derry is a beautiful city, where the Wild Atlantic Way meets the Causeway coast. We are surrounded by the hills of Donegal on three sides. We are a cross-border region that is steeped in history and heritage. If walls could speak. I have lived in Derry in the very worst of times and I have lived in Derry in the best of times, but I really believe that better times are ahead. I commit to the Assembly that I will work very hard to make the best of times better in the future.

I support the motion. There is no good version of Brexit. Brexit is bad for our economy and bad for our citizens. I was the vice-chair of the Remain campaign for Northern Ireland back in 2016 while being chief executive of the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce. Economic forecasts predicted that Brexit would damage Northern Ireland, especially in the border counties. Sure enough, last week, the Ulster Bank said that Northern Ireland is now in recession. Thank you, Brexit.

While Northern Ireland faced the challenges of Brexit, we had a political vacuum, and our business leaders stepped up. They tried to make sense and tried to make contingency plans, with little or no information. Businesses are not orange or green; they just want to get on with things. I want the Assembly and Executive to work more closely with the business community — with all communities — and academics, and to move ahead with the implementation of Brexit. However, I am pragmatic. The UK leaves the EU on 31 January — 11 days from now. We need to play the ball where it has landed. The SDLP and the North did not want a land border in Ireland, and nor did we want a watery border in the Irish Sea. All Members must work hard to ensure that the withdrawal agreement guarantees unfettered access for not only Northern Ireland goods moving to GB but goods moving from Great Britain into Northern Ireland. There are competing narratives out there. The EU Commission will protect the single market and the customs union. It has said that the EU import and export formalities will need to take place. We need to understand what they are.

I do not like the withdrawal agreement Bill. It gives the UK Government too much power over Northern Ireland. We need certainty around our future arrangements, but we need to prepare for Brexit. Our economy is weak, and we have poor productivity due to underinvestment in physical and human capital, especially in my city. We must build our skills to build our economy. Our second city needs a full-sized university of 10,000 students. We need to retain more of our talent instead of exporting it. Limiting the size of our university is a terrible act of —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close, please?

Ms McLaughlin: — economic self-harm.

I will end by quoting the Irish economist John FitzGerald, whose recent analysis of the North's economy was that, to improve the economy, the most important steps are:

“to reduce the number of early school leavers and increase the numbers of graduates”.

That is true, Mr Speaker, and nowhere is it more important than in the city of Derry, where poverty levels are much too high. It is a failure that I am determined to challenge. That is at the core of my new role in the Assembly. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Boylan: Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I speak in favour of the motion. I put on record my thanks to the likes of BCAB — Border Communities Against Brexit. It played a major and pivotal role and brought a challenge to Europe on behalf of a number of people whom I represent — people who were born and reared in a border county. I also acknowledge the work of ICBAN, the Irish Central Border Area Network, which is made up of a number of councils from along the border corridor. It compiled three reports on the border and Brexit. Any person who has read any of those reports will have seen the remarks made and the challenges that are facing those people along the areas that a lot of us represent.

There is no good in Brexit for Ireland. Brexit, in any form, will be hugely damaging for Ireland and the border region in particular.

Our community — workers, farmers, small businesses and students — will face considerable challenges in the time ahead, irrespective of the exact type of Brexit forced upon us. It is worth remembering that the people in the North voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union. Sinn Féin has worked to secure unique arrangements for the North in order to offer some protection for the economy, avoid any hardening of the border and protect, most importantly, the Good Friday Agreement. Those protections were secured not at Westminster but in Dublin and Brussels. Under the terms of the current withdrawal agreement, the people of the North stand to lose rights, funding and opportunities that derive from membership of the European Union. A number of the social, workers' and economic rights we enjoy are based on EU legislation. For example, cross-border access to some social security depends on European directives.

2.30 pm

My constituency of Newry and Armagh is a large, mostly rural area, with over 70 border crossings and some others known to locals only. Brexit has the potential to devastate our constituency. The loss of access to EU funding streams is a grave concern. Newry and Armagh has benefited hugely from EU funding streams, and we have absolutely no confidence in a British Government replacing them. Single farm payments via the common agricultural policy were worth nearly £25 million to the Newry and Armagh economy in a single financial year.

Membership of the European Union brings a number of opportunities, including, for example, the Erasmus programme. Although it is not flawless, it presents the opportunity for young people to study and work across the EU. That will be lost in the future.

A majority of our people voted against Brexit. We will not, and we do not, consent to Brexit. That is the message we should send from the Chamber today.

Mr McCrossan: Before I contribute, I welcome my colleagues to the House and congratulate them on their maiden speech. I know that Sinéad and Matthew will be powerful advocates for their constituencies and Northern Ireland more widely.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute by supporting the Executive motion and my party by not giving the British Government our consent over the withdrawal deal. I am glad the Executive have finally been able to show a united front on Brexit, regardless of our political backgrounds, and, equally, I am glad that parties have finally started to listen to business, civic society and the public, who have long voiced their concerns over Brexit and its impact here.

In that regard, and having had no representation in this Chamber for three very long and difficult years, I first of all thank the EU 27 for their solidarity in ensuring that the North and its people are protected as far as possible from the worst impacts of Brexit.

As a representative of West Tyrone, a border constituency, and as a Strabane man who lives just a short distance from the border and Lifford, I know full well that there is no such thing as a good Brexit and that there are no positives to come from a British-imposed exit from the European Union. Brexit creates barriers to trade. It is silent on workers' rights and on social justice. It will inevitably damage Britain's economy and cause significant collateral damage to Ireland, North and South. Despite the Prime Minister's promises, it will swallow up resources and funding, which means that public services will take a hit. That will have a long-term knock-on effect here as well, as is well-documented in the concerns of my fellow Members.

Businesses in my constituency of West Tyrone are, rightfully, fearful as to what Brexit will bring to them in tariffs, extra costs and bureaucracy. For three years they have felt voiceless, and I am sure I speak for many who feel joy at seeing this place restored to give them some voice to the challenges we face. That view is reflected right across the entirety of this island, with grave uncertainty facing our agri sector, manufacturing, SMEs and many other industries.

The withdrawal Bill does little to alleviate those concerns. While it is positive that the withdrawal deal does not place a de facto border across the island, it creates economic implications for trade with GB, which could hamper businesses and the economy here. The SDLP has serious concerns over the Northern Ireland protocol and the lack of detail that it provides. Last week, I was glad to see the North's MPs, including my party leader, Colum Eastwood, and colleague Claire Hanna, come together in the House of Commons to support amendments to ensure that the North has unfettered access to GB markets. This has major implications for businesses trading between GB and Northern Ireland that must provide declarations on animal health, VAT tariffs, standards, rules of origin and, perhaps, rules of destination. All these things are adding additional costs, resource requirements and huge concern for businesses, many of which are already operating with fine margins.

I have no faith that this Tory Government will act honourably and offset this financial burden. The most

recent behaviour of the Tory Government shows that they do not serve our interests here, they never have served our interests here and, certainly, in the future, will not prioritise our interests or those of the people of the North of Ireland.

Last week's amendments to protect business here were struck down by a huge Tory majority in Westminster, and it leaves us, in this Chamber, with a very important role to play to shape the future of trade on this Island. While the Government intend to cut the Northern Ireland parties out of the Brexit process and out of having anything to do with the Northern Ireland protocol, it is important that we send them a strong message from this House. It is important that we strongly tell them that we do not endorse this deal. We will not be walked over, and we will not let all the rights and freedoms be taken away from us without a fight. The restoration of this Assembly and our politicians working together, united in this capacity, is vital.

We need to utilise any leverage we may have to ensure that our protections are not removed against our will. We need a strong relationship with a new Southern Government to ensure that, in terms of the EU, we are treated fairly and equitably. The SDLP supports the motion.

Mr Speaker: I call Rachel Woods.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that it is Rachel Woods's maiden speech.

Miss Woods: Thank you, again. Today, it is refreshing to hear such objections to Brexit. Given this, I wonder who would have thought it was a good idea in the first place.

It is of note that the First Minister stated that correspondence was received last week on this matter. I would be interested to know, given the context of the previous and current item of business, when this correspondence was actually received. It would be interesting to know when this letter was made available to Members of this House, as members of the "naughty corner" here are yet to receive it.

It is concerning that competences that had been devolved to this House and that are to come back from the EU are not to be devolved but held by the UK Government. We must be sceptical of any assurances that this will be temporary, as the scene changes so frequently. The needs of Northern Ireland need to be understood and reflected in any agreement, but this is not what we have currently. What are the guarantees that the UK Government will be acting in the best interests of Northern Ireland on crucial decisions, such as workers' rights, freedom of movement, goods and services and the future of our businesses, and are taking these important concerns into account?

What of our common cause? What affects all of us? The future of our environment and the climate crisis. Why would we trust a Government whose current record is summed up by an empty chair and a melting ice sculpture; whose record is a prime example of greenwashing? One important example is that we are set to miss the 2020 and 2030 emissions targets on PM2.5.

The majority of Northern Ireland never consented to Brexit. They voted against it, they continue to lobby against it, and they know it is an act of self-harm. This is the first time in many years that we have cross-party support reflecting the

will of the majority of people in Northern Ireland. We do not consent to the cutting of the devolution settlement nor to the withdrawal agreement, and, as such, we support the motion.

Mr Allister: In keeping with tradition, I congratulate the previous Member to speak on her maiden speech. I might not have agreed with very much of it, but, nonetheless, there will be more of that on other occasions.

Can I echo the point she made? The First Minister assured the House that all Members had been furnished with a copy of the Brexit Secretary's letter. I can assure her that I have not received a copy. I have checked with the Business Office; there are no copies in the Business Office. I just wonder how the distribution was perfected?

Mrs Foster: Thank you for allowing me to intervene, Mr Allister. If I misled the House, I certainly did not mean to do that, Mr Speaker. It has been laid in the Library for everyone, and everyone has access to it.

Mr Allister: Now we know, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: If I could come to the substance of my remarks: the fact that the United Kingdom joined the EU as one nation but is not leaving it as one nation goes to the very heart and puts the finger on the withdrawal agreement's betrayal of Northern Ireland, because, to all intents and purposes, Northern Ireland, under this deal, is to remain subject to the EU's customs union, subject to its customs code, subject to its tariffs and subject to the laws made surrounding that.

Northern Ireland will also, to all intents and purposes, remain in the EU single market for goods — all goods — and, therefore, will be subject to hundreds of laws into which we will have no input or contribution. We will be rule takers in customs and goods regulations. The practical, physical outworking, of course, is a border down the Irish Sea — a manifestation of how far Northern Ireland's interests have been betrayed by this deal in circumstances in which the vast majority of its trade is with GB, the vast majority of its goods come from GB and a comparatively small minority of trade is with the Irish Republic. Yet, in order to protect unfettered trade with the Irish Republic, the answer, apparently, of this agreement is to fetter trade with GB.

It is not very hard to work out the economic consequences of that for this part of the United Kingdom. It will orientate our economy away. I do not care what the Prime Minister says: it is not the Prime Minister's rhetoric that matters; it is the cold, hard print of the agreement, and what I have outlined is what it says. The Prime Minister, for all his rhetoric, has consciously abandoned this part of the United Kingdom to the clutches of the EU, to be a sort of EU colony in the worst possible traditions. Of course, that is intended to orientate our economy away from the United Kingdom and towards the Irish Republic in the hope, of some, that it is a relatively short step from economic unity to political unity.

I have heard some soothing comments today that there are those of a nationalist tradition who do not support a border in the Irish Sea. Really? Let me just remind them that it was their hysteria about prioritising no checks, no border and no recognition from Northern Ireland to the Republic that evolved and created this situation. Of course, it fits

entirely into the glove of nationalism that you dilute the link with Great Britain, establish a border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and thereby undermine that union. I am sorry: I do not buy the platitudes from some that this is not about undermining the constitutional and economic position of Northern Ireland.

That brings me to this point: we are told to take some comfort from the fact that, now, the Executive will have an input into ongoing/forward negotiations. What will be the consequence of that? You have unionists in the DUP, whose position is that it wants Brexit, does not want a border in the Irish Sea and wants to maintain the economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom, and you have Sinn Féin saying the very opposite. What will be the input of the Executive on those critical issues?

It will patently be utterly ineffective, cancelled out one by the other. I see no comfort in that regard whatsoever, and, indeed, I suppose, it takes me back in a way —.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Allister: Very well. I will not go there then. With that, I draw my remarks to a conclusion. I certainly am opposed to this deal, but that is not because I am opposed to Brexit; it is because I did not get the Brexit that is a proper, thoroughgoing, successful Brexit for Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll: People Before Profit is a socialist organisation. We want to see society organised in the interests of ordinary people, and, for that reason, we do not support Boris Johnson's Tory vision of Brexit, including the deal that he is pushing through Westminster. Unlike those who were happy to shake his hand and smile for the camera last week with him, we consider Johnson to be a dangerous charlatan who has little concern for people here and less concern for those who are working-class and would be most impacted on by the details of the deal.

I have been clear in the past that I am no great friend of the EU as an institution because its foundations are built on neoliberalism, because of its role in forcing austerity in the South of Ireland and beyond, because of its treatment of migrants, whom it recently voted to allow to drown in the Mediterranean Sea, and, most recently, because of its complicity in the stifling of democracy in Catalonia, including the complete silence it afforded when the Spanish state cracked the heads of independence campaigners in Barcelona and beyond.

We recognise that the vast majority of people here do not support Johnson's Tory Brexit, and we recognise that to impose it here would be a flagrant attack on democracy. We think that the deal could have a negative impact on working-class people.

I know, too, that some parties here blustered about Brexit for months, but, when it came to negotiating a 60-page deal with the British Government just over a week ago, the New Decade, New Approach deal barely mentioned Brexit at all. That tells me something about some of the parties here. It tells me that their bluster about Brexit was simply a disguised form of the usual orange and green sabre-rattling that we get during every election period and that, when they were actually given a chance to do something

about Brexit by tying the British Government down to specific commitments, they failed to do so.

People Before Profit believe that it is entirely possible to have a different kind of politics and a different kind of society, one that is not tied to elites in London, Brussels or, indeed, Dublin. In our party, we stand with none of those elites, but, instead, stand on the side of ordinary people no matter what their background. Today, we reaffirm our opposition to a Tory Brexit, to Boris Johnson's vision for our future. We stand for our commitment to fighting for an alternative, socialist future.

Ms Sugden: I recall comments from an Executive meeting more than three and a half years ago that, despite the outcome of the referendum, despite the differences in the room, we would put our best foot forward and lead in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland and Ireland. Sadly, we did not, and only those in the room heard those comments.

The words of the First Minister this afternoon sound very similar to those spoken in 2016, and I sincerely hope that her words, along with the endorsement of the deputy First Minister and the wider Executive, are genuine. I have no doubt that each is acutely aware of the responsibility that rests on their shoulders and the scrutiny they face not just from MLAs but from those outside the Building. We have two years to convince the people of Northern Ireland of our value, and I fear that, in a Brexit context, that will be incredibly difficult.

The significant difference between now and 2016 is time and opportunity to do anything. While I appreciate the Executive Office creating an opportunity to enable Members to share their concerns regarding the withdrawal agreement Bill, I agree with Mr Allister's motion that we should have been able to exercise our scrutiny powers. It is disappointing that the majority of the House did not agree, and I reiterate comments that I made on restoration day: it is regrettable that no party chose official Opposition, but do not limit the integrity of this legislature further by removing our accountability.

I support the motion, and I see value in the House coming together on an issue that will affect all the people of Northern Ireland. I am, however, unsure of the practical purpose, other than to send a hollow message back to the UK Government. It feels too little and far too late. We lost our opportunity to participate in the legislative consent process. We cannot formally reject the legislative consent motion; we are simply putting on record what, I expect, the UK Government already know. I expect that the Prime Minister and his Cabinet will treat our motion similarly to how he treated Scotland when they rejected it. I expect that they will deem it unnecessary, as they did the cross-party amendment on 8 January. Unnecessary for whom? Certainly not the Tory Party, which has no representation here other than the Secretary of State, who tells us to get on with it, even to the detriment of the most vulnerable in our society.

I commend the DUP, the SDLP and the Alliance Party for taking a practical approach in the House of Commons to addressing the inevitable challenges that the withdrawal agreement will bring to Northern Ireland. They sought to provide much-needed clarity regarding unfettered access for Northern Ireland to the UK market. Much credit goes to the business community for their input. They have

been trying to cajole politicians for three years, knowing the potential impact that Brexit will have on our economy. Stakeholder contribution is valuable regarding that and, indeed, every other issue that we consider. Regrettably, the UK Government rejected the amendment, arguing that Government assurances over access to the UK market were sufficient. The momentous deal just over a week ago and the promises of additional funding demonstrate to all of us that assurances from Mr Johnson's Government cannot be taken for granted.

Brexit is not over on 1 February 2020. It is the beginning of our biggest political test. Regardless of your view — "In" or "Out" — undoubtedly, dismantling 30 years of political, social and economic structures will be our biggest challenge.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. It has been a fairly constructive debate in our shared opposition to Brexit being foisted on us. It is clear across the House that there is widespread support that we should not agree to give our consent on the matter. I note the comments from Ms Sugden about it falling on deaf ears in terms of what the British Government will do on the back of this, but, nonetheless, it is really important, and both the First Minister and I felt that it was right and proper for the Assembly to have its say on the matter. We also agreed that we should recommend that consent is not given, and I am glad that that is the response, in the main, that Members have contributed to the debate today. There is no doubt — the First Minister said this in her opening remarks — that it is for different reasons that we come to this position today; nonetheless, it is significant that we are in the space that we are in.

It is of no surprise that our objection is shared by our colleagues in the Scottish Government, whom other Members have referred to today, and Wales, which will vote tomorrow. It is no surprise at all that this objection is felt across Scotland, Wales and here. Brexit is unprecedented: no member state has left the EU before now. It is only 11 days until we exit the European Union after 47 years of membership. Since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and the restoration of power-sharing in 2007, the Union has provided significant financial support to the peace process under the Peace and INTERREG programmes. We now have a restored Executive and a fully functioning Assembly, North/South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council, which is what our citizens want and what we who are elected to the Assembly want. Our shared determination is that those institutional arrangements will continue with much more vigour, going forward. It is our responsibility as elected representatives to work together to ensure that the rights and entitlements of our citizens are protected and that we deal with the challenges posed by Brexit for the good of everyone.

Members will recall that our Brexit priorities were set out in the letter that the then deputy First Minister — the late Martin McGuinness — and the First Minister sent to the Prime Minister, Theresa May, in 2016, and I note that other Members have referred to that. It was clear then, as it is now, that there could be no return to the borders of the past and that any border could not be an impediment to the movement of goods, people and services. It is now absolutely imperative that we redouble our efforts to

develop and rebuild a modern, competitive and sustainable economy and to safeguard jobs.

We want to be equally clear now, as we were in 2016, that it is critical to our economy that our businesses are able to retain their competitiveness. Slowing businesses down or putting the costs of doing business up is not in anyone's interests, including consumers'.

Our membership of the EU has provided substantial financial aid towards infrastructure, agricultural subsidies and other grant aid. The First Minister and I will be working closely with the Finance Minister to ensure that the British Government are fully aware of the importance of replacing those funds so that many critical projects may continue to benefit our communities now and into the future.

Energy is also a key priority for us, given our position in a small and isolated market. Businesses and investors will be concerned about energy costs and ensuring a consistent supply that meets the needs of modern industry. We need to ensure that that vital aspect of our economy is not undermined in the negotiating process.

The importance of issues that affect our agri-food sector must also be considered by the British Government. As well as the important matter of a replacement for CAP funding, they must pay close attention to the agricultural community's concerns about the potential for additional burdens and costs. The industry needs early guidance on any adjustments that it will need to make, and consumers too will look to the British Government to make adequate provision for any necessary assistance or mitigations. Brexit will also have significant implications for the work of our Departments, and that will need to be looked at properly.

Junior Ministers Kearney and Lyons will attend a Brexit meeting with the British Government tomorrow. The Minister of Finance, Conor Murphy MLA, will be with the Treasury on Thursday. I and the First Minister will attend the Joint Ministerial Committee on Brexit in Cardiff on 28 January. We will all be taking every opportunity available to us to press strongly the case for funding to help the key sectors of our economy.

Many Members have made important points throughout the debate and raised a number of valid concerns, all of which we will be working hard to address.

One of the most significant things about the debate over the past three years has been the fact that the business community has spoken with one voice and has made its voice heard loud and clear here, in London and in Brussels. It has made sure that its voice was heard and counted. I commend the business community for the work that it has done over that time. That is everybody from the Chamber of Commerce, the CBI, Retail NI, the Retail Consortium, the Freight Transport Association — I am going to get myself in trouble now that I have started naming people [*Laughter*] — Manufacturing NI, the Food and Drink Association, the Federation of Small Businesses, Hospitality Ulster, the Institute of Directors, the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Construction Employers Federation. Those and many other organisations were consistent and strong in articulating effectively their shared concerns for the future of industry here. We want to continue to work with them in the time ahead.

There is no doubt that we face significant challenges to ensuring that there are no barriers to trade, either North/South or east-west. As I have said, we do not want to go back to the borders of the past. In my role as deputy First Minister and joint head of the Government, I am committed to working in the interests of everyone. We will be working with our business community and the key sectors of the economy. Our businesses need to be able to benefit from any future free trade agreements, if and when negotiated. We need to guarantee that we, along with the other devolved Administrations, will be consulted on the wider trade policy. I know that that is a concern that Members have articulated today.

We are equally concerned about citizens' rights and will need to engage closely on developments around the establishment of the Independent Monitoring Authority for the Citizens' Rights Agreements. The Executive subcommittee that will consider Brexit issues, which we have agreed and which is written into the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, will be a key structure in the coordination and development of our Executive response.

We therefore have much to do in the next phase, as preparations commence for the negotiations on the future relationship. The protocol affirms that the Good Friday Agreement should be protected in all its parts. We will ensure that the British Government and the EU live up to those commitments and responsibilities throughout the negotiations.

To conclude, we must work together in common cause to overcome the challenges that have been imposed on us by Brexit. Should the vote on the motion pass, we will immediately respond to the British Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to convey to him that the Assembly has not given its consent to the British Government to legislate on our behalf.

Mr Speaker: I thank all Members for the conduct of the debate this afternoon. It has been very respectful.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Assembly notes the request from the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union for the consent of the Assembly for the provisions of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill that affect its competence; and affirms that the Assembly does not agree to give its consent.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that, in order to enable Committees to meet to address urgent business, the next sitting should take place on Monday 27 January 2020. An Order Paper will issue after the Business Committee meets later.

Adjourned at 3.00 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 27 January 2020

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members will have been saddened to learn of the passing of the former deputy First Minister Mr Séamus Mallon. The Business Committee has agreed, as a mark of respect, to suspend today's sitting until 4.30 pm, when the sitting will resume. Members will have an opportunity to pay their respects to Mr Mallon and to sign a book of condolence. The business scheduled for today in the revised Order Paper will then commence at 6.00 pm. The rescheduling requires a formal item of business, which I will take now.

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr K Buchanan: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 27 January 2020.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 27 January 2020.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I now propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 4.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.03 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

4.32 pm

Tributes to Former deputy First Minister Séamus Mallon

Mr Speaker: It is an honour for me to pay my respects to the family of Séamus Mallon, who passed away last Friday. Is mór an onóir domh ómós a thabhairt do chlann Séamus Mallon ar a bhás Dé hAoine. Frequently in the Assembly, we focus on our differences as political opponents in a way that disguises the underlying respect that we have for those who put themselves forward to seek to improve our society. We have an opportunity to demonstrate that respect today as we express our condolences on the passing of the former deputy First Minister, Séamus Mallon.

I said on Friday evening that Séamus Mallon was a towering figure in our politics. That was clear before the Assembly was established. He had already demonstrated his commitment to public service as a school principal but was then motivated to fight against injustice in the political arena in the civil rights era of the day and as a long-standing deputy leader of his party. In the Chamber, we should also recognise his record as a parliamentarian of distinction, whether in the Assembly, Westminster or Seanad Éireann. That reputation was built partly on his personality. He certainly was his own man, with strongly held views, but he expressed them passionately, using his talent for a pithy turn of phrase and his dry wit.

There are only nine of us remaining in the current Assembly who were elected alongside Séamus in the first Assembly in 1998. From the perspective of recent political difficulties, it is sometimes easy to lose sight of how far we have come, but, when you look back to political relationships in the Chamber in 1998, we have travelled a significant distance. It was a challenging time to become one of the first holders of the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister with responsibility for leading the institutions, but he was held in high regard nonetheless as a straight talker and a man of integrity.

When you look back at the Hansard reports of those early days, there were two themes that he highlighted that remain particularly relevant today. First, he knew that diversity of political opinion could be a source of animosity but that being inclusive could offer huge potential if a way could be found to work together. Secondly, he was clear that debates and legislation might set a lead but that it is mindsets and attitudes in the community and in the streets that are central to taking us all forward.

In 1998, Séamus Mallon and David Trimble welcomed Bill Clinton to the Waterfront Hall. In his address, Séamus set out that the road to the future is always under construction. In recent years, he made no secret of his personal frustration that greater progress had not been made, but developments over recent weeks give us a chance to continue along that road.

This afternoon, we recognise the huge political contribution made by Séamus Mallon, and I give my condolences to his party colleagues in the SDLP. However, we are, of course, mindful that a family is in mourning. Family was important to Séamus Mallon, and one could not fail to have been moved by his account of putting the

care of his wife, Gertrude, above seeking the leadership of his party. So, as I conclude my remarks, I express the Assembly's sympathies to Séamus's daughter, Orla, his son-in-law, Mark, his granddaughter, Lara, and his sisters Maura, Jean and Kate. We hope that, in time, they can be comforted by happy memories and their pride in his legacy. Suaimhneas síoraí dá anam uasal. Eternal rest on his noble soul.

As is customary, I will now invite party leaders to speak for about five minutes to pay tribute to our late friend and colleague. I will then call Members as they rise in their places. I will not be imposing strict time constraints, but I encourage Members to be brief — they should speak for no more than three or four minutes, if they possibly can — to give time for as many as possible to speak in the hour allocated for tributes.

When the tributes have concluded, Members are welcome to join me in signing a book of condolence in the Great Hall. The book of condolence will be available for Members and staff to sign until the close of plenary business this evening. It will be open to the public from 10.00 am tomorrow until 5.00 pm on Friday.

The Assembly will now pay its own respects.

Ms Mallon: The recent history of Ireland, and particularly Northern Ireland, over the last 50 years is characterised by discrimination, division, conflict, violence and awful, senseless killings and bombings that only ever served to drive us all further apart. It is also characterised by dialogue, engagement, acknowledgement of difference and of legitimate coexisting identities, agreement and, ultimately, a political accommodation that has, difficulties and all, led us to where we all are today, which is representing all communities that live cheek by jowl in this region by being here in the House, where we all have a duty to serve those people.

Séamus Mallon was integral to all of what went on in this shared home place right up to the formation of this power-sharing Assembly. It is no exaggeration to say that, without him and his influence, we would not be here today and would not be able to extol his virtues in this very Chamber.

Séamus was there at Sunningdale in 1973. He was there at the Seanad in 1982. His support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 was, correctly, regarded as crucial. If Séamus had not deemed the landmark accord as a vehicle for extolling and advancing the position of nationalists in the North, you can be sure he would have publicly said just that, but he kept a long-term goal in mind and became a vocal supporter of the agreement.

He was in the House of Commons from 1986 to 2005, where he left a mark with his passionate oratory and in his diligent, persistent work on policing reform. He laid over 200 amendments, which were part of a personal and party crusade to deliver a policing and justice system to which we could all belong and support. Perhaps more than anything else, the policing and justice structures that exist today are Séamus Mallon's lasting and enduring legacy to life in this part of the world.

He was here. Séamus believed in this Assembly, in an Executive and in delivering good government for all our people. So when he became deputy First Minister in 1998, that was a role that he embraced, even at times when he was not entirely comfortable. Along with David Trimble,

he sent out a message that there was a new way to do politics here. Séamus and David were a pair with their own dynamic, and in spite of consistent external pressures, they did their best to deliver on the promise of the Good Friday Agreement when it was far from easy to do so.

He was here. It felt to us younger SDLP members and activists that he was always here and ever-present, like there was no beginning and no end to Séamus Mallon: that he just was.

At party conference time, he was always there, the very last to go to bed as he inspired a younger generation in song, poetry and recounting old stories. However, all of that came after the serious political discourse, and that, of course, is where Séamus excelled. When he said something, he meant it — no question — and, in politics, that is a wonderful legacy. No messing, no spin, no winking, no nodding: just tell it like it is — the Séamus Mallon way.

The Assembly owes a debt of gratitude to Séamus Mallon. I am pleased that he got to see the devolved institutions that he helped to create restored, and I am pleased, on behalf of the SDLP, that we have this opportunity to comment on his life, his passing and his enormous contribution to politics here.

Séamus was a man of peace. He was a man of non-violence. He was a man of justice, fairness, truth and courage. You can be sure that the next generation of SDLP politicians will live by the Séamus Mallon mantra; that is in our DNA. However, all of us here, across all Benches, would do well to remember and live by Séamus's judgement of how we share this piece of land. As he laid out in his maiden speech in the House of Commons 34 years ago:

"We have two stark and clear choices. We can live together in generosity and compassion or we can continue to die in bitter disharmony."

I know which I choose, I know which Séamus Mallon chose, and I am for ever grateful that I got to stand on the shoulder of an Irish political giant.

I am personally filled with immense sadness that we will have no more visits in Markethill. I will miss his straight-talking, honest advice, but Séamus and all that he stood for will continue to guide me and the SDLP family. At the requiem mass and celebration of his life today, we were fittingly reminded in the missalette of 'From The Canton of Expectation' by Seamus Heaney:

"To know there is one among us who never swerved from all his instincts told him was right action, who stood his ground in the indicative, whose boat will lift when the cloudburst happens."

I will sorely miss you, Séamus. We will greatly miss you, Séamus, and the country mourns your loss. Séamus, ár mbuíochoas leat, a chara dhil.

Mrs Foster: First, on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, I pay my respects and give condolences to our SDLP colleagues. They will forgive me if my thoughts are principally today with Séamus's family. Of course, with Orla and her husband, Mark, their daughter, Lara, and with Séamus's sisters and the wider family.

I pay tribute to Séamus as a fellow member of a small band of politicians who have headed the shared office of OFMDFM, which is now the Executive Office, and recognise its distinct and unique challenges. As well as being Northern Ireland's original deputy First Minister, Séamus Mallon was a Member of Parliament for 19 years and his party's deputy leader for 22 years.

The climate that he had to operate in, of course, was very different from the one that we operate in today. There was no social media, less 24-hour news, but decades of murder and mayhem that, thankfully, we no longer have to deal with to anywhere near the same extent. He was seen by many in unionism as a more typical Irish nationalist than his long-term partner leading the SDLP, John Hume, yet perhaps viewed as more pragmatic and with a better understanding of unionists. That may have been as a result of the fact that he lived in Markethill with his unionist neighbours at every turn.

He was a fierce critic of violence, something which is much easier from the armchairs of BT9, the south side of Dublin or the shires of England, but Séamus Mallon had to walk daily amongst the gunmen and bombers he was calling out. He had to go back on to the streets of Newry and along the border to attend to his constituents, to campaign and to seek votes for himself and his party colleagues.

He saw council colleagues in Armagh who sat in the same chamber as him murdered, and he sought to attend every funeral of those in his constituency who died in the Troubles; sometimes, when he was far from welcome. He recognised that nationalism needed to have confidence in and support policing.

He did not mince his words about the failings that he saw, often to the frustration of many hard-working, professional police officers.

4.45 pm

Séamus Mallon, who had an interest in plays and amateur dramatics, became a commanding orator with a presence in the Chamber. He was an effective communicator, valued by journalists for his quips and one-liners, and, of course, a key negotiator for the SDLP. He could be thran, but he could also be very thoughtful. He was committed to his local area and to where he had been brought up. That was reflected in his recent memoir, published last year, which contains much of his experience. It does not dwell on the past but offers insights and advice for the future.

Whilst 100% in favour of Irish unity, he knew that it could not be forced on people. He knew of the consequences that come from wafer-thin majorities. He saw the outworkings of a close Brexit vote and the polarising effect that that had here and in Great Britain: to make a success of constitutional change would require sufficient consensus.

During his maiden speech in the House of Commons, which Nichola has already referenced, he said:

"The two cathedrals of the Protestant Church and the Catholic Church look across at each other in the city of Armagh. Just as the bells tolled in the new year I saw the obscenity of two policemen being blown to smithereens ... We have two stark and clear choices. We can live together in generosity and compassion or we can continue to die in bitter disharmony ... Are we

to move into the new century with a millstone of blood, as it were, hanging around our necks, with a millstone of division and sectarian bickering, with the daily catalogue of threats of violence and death? Or are we to create a new vision for a new century ... on the basis of agreement and reconciliation ...?"

In closing, Séamus made it clear that he would pursue his objectives by:

"peaceful, democratic, constitutional and political means ... on the Floor of the House, or on the floor of whatever other forum is available to me ... in such a way that will not cost one drop of blood and will not remove anyone's self-respect for him."

Some of those questions and challenges from Séamus's maiden speech in 1986 remain unfulfilled today. The restoration of a Northern Ireland Government and fully functioning institutions provides us with the opportunity to address them. Northern Ireland and its leaders must carry forward that vision, building a shared society in which everyone has a stake and feels at home and working together in the interests of all our people.

Finally, on the day on which we pay tributes and remember Séamus Mallon, I also acknowledge that this is the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In that camp alone, one million Jews were put to death because of their faith, and six million Jews were killed overall. The scale of that hideous extermination must always be remembered on this Holocaust Remembrance Day. I stand with the Jewish people across the world as they face ongoing anti-Semitic abuse today, and I remember the horror of the Holocaust.

Mrs O'Neill: I join colleagues across the House in conveying my sympathy and that of Sinn Féin to the family and friends of the late Séamus Mallon, whose requiem Mass we celebrated in Markethill earlier today. In particular, I offer my condolences to Séamus's daughter, Orla; his son-in-law, Mark; and his beautiful wee granddaughter, Lara, who played her part in making the funeral Mass a very beautiful and fitting tribute to her granda.

The loss of Séamus Mallon is a significant moment in the history of this island, but it is, first and foremost, a devastating loss for his family, his friends and his colleagues in the SDLP, for whom he was a close and special figure. I know that he was a very valued mentor to Nichola and Colum. Our thoughts are with all of you today and with Séamus's family.

I, personally, did not know Séamus very well, but I certainly knew of his reputation as deputy leader of the SDLP for many years and the party's chief negotiator during the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, to which he clearly made a huge contribution, not only in reaching that historic agreement but in leading the new Executive as deputy First Minister and joint head of Government. Séamus served not only as a Minister and a Member of the Legislative Assembly but as an MP at Westminster and a senator in Leinster House. He had an electoral record that we in the Chamber can only admire. In each of those roles, he used his voice to articulate the interests, the views and the feelings of the nationalist community in the North for over 40 years.

The SDLP leader, Colum Eastwood, has, in recent days, described Séamus as a force of nature: that is very apt. Séamus has left a legacy of hard work and commitment to creating a better society and a better Ireland. He has left an indelible print on the politics in Ireland. Despite our different political outlooks and paths challenging the British Government's presence and the causes of division and partition in Ireland, there is no doubt that Séamus and his friend John Hume helped to open up the prospects for peaceful change. We put aside party differences to effect real change for the people of our country, and I put on record our recognition of and respect for the critical role played by both men and many others at that time to bring about the peace process and recognise the courage, generosity and risks taken by them both to achieve peace here in Ireland.

Séamus led a full political life in the service of the Irish people. Right into his eighties, he was making his voice heard, and, even if we did not always agree, he made sure that we heard it and that we were listening. As we mourn his passing, let those of us in the House who have formed the new Executive cooperate in every way that we can to fulfil the promise of the Good Friday Agreement to a new generation. In that way, Séamus's contribution will, I hope, have everlasting value and never be forgotten. May he rest in peace.

Dr Aiken: I rise to pay my respects and offer my sympathies to Orla and the wider Mallon family, and may I then add my own words and those of the Ulster Unionist Party to commemorate the life of a great Irishman: Séamus Mallon?

Séamus and our then leader, David Trimble, did much to see Northern Ireland emerge from the destructive and evil days of the Troubles, and, while David saw the recognition of the Nobel Prize, Séamus, who probably deserved it as much as his leader, John Hume, has only latterly been recognised for the inspirational leader and politician that he was; indeed, as one of my predecessors, Lord Empey, said today, there was no doubt that, if John Hume was the SDLP's ideas man, Séamus was the person to turn those ideas into practice and workable solutions.

I first came to know Séamus long before I got into politics through my involvement in a range of North/South and east-west bodies. He was always courteous but forthright in his views, and he had a fierce determination to get his point across. When I became involved in politics, he was always supportive, although a bit bemused at why I would wish to get involved. As he said himself, it was catch-22: you had to be mad to want to be a politician, but, if nobody did it, where would we be?

What always struck me about Séamus was his integrity, his courage and his abhorrence of all forms of violence. As he himself wrote:

"I have mentioned my neighbour 'Jack Adams', a good man who couldn't do enough for you, but who was shot dead by the IRA because he felt he was doing his duty by joining the RUC reserve. That dehumanizing of individuals, of a community, so they could be killed just for wearing a police or UDR uniform — that is what I will not support. That man and his family had their home here for four hundred years, but he had to be killed because the IRA's little Green Book said

so. *The awfulness and nihilism of that is what I am fundamentally opposed to.*

I believe that thirty years of violence has meant the republican movement has shot and bombed itself out of the vital process of persuading people for Irish unity."

While Séamus had a very different view of the future of Northern Ireland from that of the Ulster Unionist Party, we are the first to recognise that he was a statesman of the first order, a politician with that very rare quality of steadfast integrity and someone who, along with David Trimble, believed that only by truly working together in a spirit of partnership could we make this place truly be 'A Shared Home Place'. Maybe, Mr Speaker, it could be his lasting legacy that we current political leaders draw inspiration from his words and decide, once and for all, that power-sharing, rather than power division, should be the model we seek to achieve and make this truly a place to cherish.

Mrs Long: I add my condolences to the Mallon family, particularly to Orla, his son-in-law, Mark, and his granddaughter, Lara, and the wider family circle. I also extend sympathies to his friends and colleagues in the SDLP. As a role model for generous leadership, you can have no better.

Whilst those closest to him will feel his passing most acutely, all of us in politics — indeed, all of us in Northern Ireland — are the richer for his life and the poorer for his passing. He was a man for whom fairness and integrity were not just political ambitions but part of his DNA. His commitment to non-violence and civil rights was unwavering and uncompromising. I never had the privilege of serving with him in this Chamber — he retired the year I was elected — but I had the pleasure in recent years of sharing platforms with him on various occasions, and he had lost none of his wisdom or wit which made him such a formidable politician and such an admirable man.

While I never served here with him, I owe to him and other courageous leaders like him my opportunity to do so and to live the second half of my life in considerably more peaceful times than the first half. For that, I and, I believe, all of us owe him personally an enormous debt of gratitude. Our best and most fitting tribute to him is to work together to deliver on the promise of 1998 and the Good Friday Agreement, which was his gift to us.

Ms Bailey: We in the Green Party also extend our condolences to our SDLP colleagues in the Chamber and the wider SDLP family and, of course, to Séamus's daughter, Orla, and to his wider family. The death of a husband, father and brother is a painful event, and I wish them the strength needed for the times ahead.

Séamus was a giant in the political arena. He was a giant figure, but he came from a different political era: that of the civil rights movement. For me, he was a recognisable face on my television during my younger years. I did not have the opportunity to meet or work with him, but, certainly, his courage and willingness to take risks were his central tenets, allowing us all to be here today in the Chamber. We should all be in no doubt of that and be thankful for it and for the fact that it has allowed us to move on. His legacy will be long remembered, and we can go far in strengthening his work and his tenacity by continuing

to forge a peaceful and reconciled future for all across Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: I readily join in the condolences to the late Séamus Mallon's daughter and his wider family. No doubt, as in all deaths, these are very difficult times, and the thoughts and prayers of many of us are with them. I extend the same sympathy to his political family, the SDLP, where he was such a giant figure and a mentor to many. He will, no doubt, be long and sadly missed in those quarters.

Séamus Mallon, as a constitutional nationalist, was someone whom I could respect, no matter how much I disagreed with some of the things he had to say. Some of those things I did disagree with — his denigrating of the UDR, for example — but the fact that he advocated only constitutional means and explicitly condemned without equivocation terrorist violence earned him respect across the community. Sadly, the late Séamus Mallon's repudiation of IRA terrorism has been replicated by only one of his successors in the office of deputy First Minister, namely Mark Durkan.

That, of course, is a pointer to the evolving of these institutions, that he helped to shape, and their evolution in a retrograde direction.

5.00 pm

For all his eminence as an orator and as a straight-talking, even hard-hitting, politician, at the end of it all, he appears to have been, and was, a wholly devoted family man. The love and devotion that he committed to his late wife is well documented and much respected and speaks greatly to the strength and the character of the man. He, too, of course, is unlikely to be forgotten, nor should he be forgotten, in political circles, because he was a politician faithful to his beliefs. Thank you.

Mr Carroll: I just want to say a few brief words and to put on the record, on behalf of myself and People Before Profit, my sincerest condolences to the family and friends of Séamus Mallon, to his colleagues in the SDLP and to everyone who knew him. Obviously, he was active in politics here for a long time, many years, and today there is a large amount of grieving and loss across our community. I rise to put my thoughts with all the people who are grieving today.

Ms Sugden: Séamus Mallon would not have claimed to be impartial. He extolled his beliefs clearly and honestly. He was an Irish republican in the truest form. Mr Mallon, however, had capacity and heart to recognise that others did not necessarily share his beliefs, and rather than seek to undermine their views from the outset, he sought to understand and respect. He was empathetic and looked for humanity: the greatest, yet rarest, qualities of political leadership.

I did not know Mr Mallon, but recently I was taken by words that he said regarding unionism:

"Irish republicanism ... has to look into the unionist heart as well as the unionist mind."

I had never heard that before, and in saying so, he did not dismiss my belief, he did not disparage an important part of who I am, nor did he wrongly characterise me because I did not agree with him. Rather, he wanted to know me, and I appreciate that. Indeed, I believe it is the fundamental

principle of the Good Friday Agreement: not to be neutral if you are not, not to deny who we are, but rather embrace ourselves and each other, learn, live and love together.

I can only speak for myself, but certainly in this unionist heart and this unionist mind, are people. I expect from much of what has been said about Séamus Mallon that is what we would find in his heart and mind too: different but the same.

I wish to express my sincere condolences to Mr Mallon's family, friends and all those who knew him, in particular, members of the Social, Democratic and Labour Party. Thank you.

Mr McNulty: My sincere sympathies are with Orla and Mark and with Séamus Mallon's little princess, Lara. Also his sisters Jean, Kate and Moira, and his wider family, friends and neighbours. Of course, they are with Marie Harte, who spent many years caring for Séamus and for Gertrude, who passed away in recent years, and they are with Brendan his gardener who he spent many hours with in his greenhouse.

I want to pay tribute to and thank the players and members of O'Donovan Rossa GFC, Mullabrack, the community of Markethill, the Mid Armagh branch of the SDLP and Séamus Mallon's family, friends and neighbours who volunteered an extraordinary effort to ensure a beautiful and fitting farewell.

It is questionable whether all of us would be here today if it were not for the work of Séamus Mallon. Last night, Tommy Sands played a moving lament for Séamus at his wake. Tommy called him the last of the great Irish chieftains. Having experienced what he called the life-waste and spirit-waste of violence in the bloodstained 1970s and 1980s, he had a different dream. His was a dream of justice, peace and reconciliation, and he played a lead role in bringing justice, peace and reconciliation to our shared home place. Séamus said:

"As I prepare to take my leave of our shared home place, I find comfort in an old Greek proverb: 'A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they know they will never sit.'"

What trees has Séamus Mallon planted? I measc na naomh go raibh sé.

Mr Boylan: I want to extend my condolences and sympathies to Orla, Mark, Lara, Séamus's sisters and extended family, and to share the loss of the SDLP. We all know the great legacy that Séamus Mallon has left. It is up to all of us, but, more importantly, to the SDLP, to continue that legacy.

Being a representative of the same constituency, on occasion, I would bump into Séamus and had the odd robust conversation with him. He was a giant of a man and one you could actually learn from. Over the weekend, when I talked to some constituents, it was clear that they hold him in great esteem. On behalf of the constituents I represent I can say that Mr Mallon was one of those people who will not be forgotten by them.

I also want to extend words from Mullabrack GFC, who did a job today looking after the funeral arrangements and everything else for the Mallon family. Those people have asked me to speak on their behalf, extend their thanks and recognise the contribution that Séamus Mallon made to

the Good Friday Agreement and to his party. I just want to recognise his contribution.

Mr Dallat: Mr Speaker, in your introduction, you said that there were only nine Members left from the original Assembly. Hands up: I am one of the nine. It is with a great deal of pride and emotion that I rise to speak. I served with Séamus Mallon in the best of times and the worst of times: the best of times being when the people of Northern Ireland were able to create a power-sharing Executive in 1998 and, of course, the worst being the collapse of that Assembly a few years later.

At all times, Séamus was a statesman. He was a true and personal friend to me, but he was a friend to many other people, from all political parties, in the Assembly at that time. Yes, the SDLP has lost one of the best, but I believe that everyone has experienced a sense of loss that is not really felt every day. Now, the best tribute that we can make to Séamus is to finish the work that he began. Lest we forget: that work is in this Chamber. I know that Séamus was very happy that the Assembly agreed to sit again. Let us honour one of the greatest Irishmen who ever lived. Let us take his advice and never collapse politics again to create the risk that the men of violence may fill a vacuum that was not intended. That is important. That would be the greatest tribute that we could pay, and I believe that we will. The House has no longer just the legacy of unionism of the past — Craigavon and all that. Séamus is very much the legacy of the House in modern times, so let us honour and respect him. Let us adopt and protect that legacy with clarity and a commitment to emulate his deeply held conviction that we must move on together. I applaud the First Minister for saying that many times in recent times, and I hope everyone in the House is listening.

Séamus has left the stage. May he rest in peace, and may more than his pictures hang on the walls of this Building. Let us take his inspiration and legacy, and let us set about the difficult times ahead together in partnership. Séamus Mallon taught me to respect others. Let that be the experience of everyone in the House.

Mr Nesbitt: I first encountered Séamus Mallon about 35 years ago. I was the new presenter of 'Good Morning Ulster' on BBC Radio; he was a recently installed Member of Parliament. To interview Séamus Mallon was challenging. Here was a man who knew his brief thoroughly, knew his mind unquestionably and knew exactly how to express an opinion. Oh, did he know how to express an opinion. I was amazed he was still doing it in his 80s. Two years ago, I was at Queen's University watching him on a panel marking the 20th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. In fact, he was not on the panel; he was dominating that panel. He was head and shoulders above the rest, with his angry analysis of the missed opportunities and what had to come next. I regret the missed opportunity of not visiting him more often in Markethill. The last time was to discuss his memoir, 'A Shared Home Place', and I commend it to anybody who has not read it.

Of course, in between times, there was his great work as a negotiator and a peacemaker. Let us not underestimate the thousands, in fact, the tens of thousands, of proud nationalists who wanted unity by consent and would never for a millisecond contemplate the use of violence. Those people looked to Séamus Mallon, and, in 1998, I have no

doubt that there was a group of people who said, “If it is good enough for Séamus Mallon, it is good enough for me”.

I have a true story, if I may, Mr Speaker, but I have to change one word to stay on the right side of parliamentary language [*Laughter*] because he was a bit of a rascal. One morning I was told I had to interview him on ‘Good Morning Ulster’, and I looked at the subject matter and formed my strategy, which was very simple: I was going to wind him up. I was going to get a rise out of Séamus Mallon, but hard as I tried, and I gave it my best shots, he would not rise to the occasion. So, the next day, most unusually, I discovered that the SDLP was putting Séamus Mallon up as its spokesperson two days in a row. Just before we went live, the producer came into the studio and said, “Look, I do not want this to alter how you are planning to do this interview, and I do not know what happened between you and Séamus Mallon yesterday morning, but when I got him up on the phone there, the first thing he said to me was, ‘If that ... fellow tries to wind me up again today, I am going to do him’”. [*Laughter*] Well, Mr Speaker, I did not, he did, and I loved him for it.

Ms S Bradley: First, let me thank everybody in the House who has spoken so far and for the kind words of comfort that have been extended to us, Séamus’s SDLP colleagues. It means a lot on the day it is. I join them in offering my sincerest condolences to Orla, his daughter, Mark, his son-in-law, and princess Lara, as she has become known to us in recent times, but also to his sisters Maura, Jean and Kate and to Marie Harte, who, I understand, was every bit the family member in caring for Séamus throughout his illness.

Séamus’s life’s work has proved that the politics of coming together is the only type of politics that will ever benefit the people whom we represent. His legacy of peacemaking is not one that we should simply honour and celebrate; it goes further. It sets a standard for us all to live by and a standard that we all should aspire to. Séamus Mallon played his part in making this place, which we all call “a shared home”, a better place. I thank him for that.

Séamus was a good man — a man I was honoured to call my friend — and I thank him for all his efforts over the years in steering me. I was the recipient on occasion of the stare over the glasses that was referred to today, and it was always meant with good intent. We will miss him terribly. Thank you, Séamus, for everything. May you rest in peace.

5.15 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I join colleagues in thanking all of you who took time from your very busy diaries to attend Séamus’s funeral service. It was very much appreciated.

Séamus was a man whom I was always delighted to listen to, because I never had to guess what he meant. I always knew exactly what he was saying. I am sure that many of us have been with politicians and other people and thought, “What did he really say? What did he mean by that?”. You never had to worry about that. You got it straight, and I like straight talking.

We all know that Séamus liked a little flutter, and I hope that our ability to work together here in partnership, creating a legacy of peace, partnership and power-sharing, will prove wrong many of the pundits who seek to degrade politics every day. Our behaviour does not always inspire,

but I found it very encouraging to hear people, including the archbishop, talking today about the noble vocation of politics. We should all take heart from that, because it is about service to the community. It was people like Séamus Mallon and that want to service and to help my neighbour that got me into politics, and I am sure that it is the same for many, if not all, of you.

All Members will recall from the recent past the terrible flags protest. One of the things that stood out for me was when Séamus Mallon chastised a lot of people by saying, “Stop poking each other in the eye”. Perhaps, when we go to speak in the future or when we want to make a contribution, we will hear that voice and moderate our language. We will not always agree. We will see things differently, and we will have to articulate our viewpoints, but we should go from the base point of not poking each other in the eye.

My colleagues have thanked many who contributed to the organisation of the funeral service, but I place on record our party’s gratitude to the Police Service for its contribution. They worked very hard over the weekend and today, on what was a bitterly cold day.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the tributes. Oh, I understand that Trevor Lunn would like to speak. We didn’t record your request. I am sorry about that.

Mr Lunn: I was not aware whether there was a list or whether we had to rise in our seat, but I have risen, so here we are. [*Laughter.*] I did not know Séamus Mallon personally, although, perhaps, we belong to the same generation, going by age at least. I met him just once. It was at the funeral of one of our Banbridge councillors, Sheila McQuade, and his presence was very much appreciated at that time. Attendance at the funerals of victims of violence was very important to him, and he made a point of attending all of them in his constituency. That was surely a statement of his opposition to violence — implacable opposition to violence — from which he never wavered. My predecessor in Lagan Valley, the late and much-missed Seamus Close, knew him very well and spoke very fondly of him. Even though they had political differences at times, there was a good measure of personal friendship and respect between them.

That word “respect” has been much used in recent days, in how Séamus Mallon treated others and in their attitude to him. People from across the political spectrum have commented over the weekend and today about his honesty, his straight talking and his negotiating skills, which were used to such good effect over the years, as we all know. His partnership with John Hume was a formidable one. I am sure that it is no exaggeration to say that, without them, the Good Friday Agreement and, perhaps, other agreements might never have happened. Their legacy and that of others whom I could mention, such as David Trimble, Dr Paisley and Gerry Adams, is demonstrated by the fact that we are able to stand here today and talk about Séamus in an Assembly that has been reconstituted. I totally agree with what John Dallat said: we cannot let the opportunity pass this time. He was, of course, a committed nationalist, but, at the same time, he was a realistic one who realised that it was necessary to reach out to unionists and that there was no point in just banging a drum for a united Ireland. He appreciated the need for consent.

I join others in sending my sympathy and condolences to his family circle and to his SDLP colleagues, who must be feeling it today. They have lost a great man who, I understand, was still providing insight and sound advice until very recently. I heard Colum Eastwood this morning on the radio pass a comment along the lines that, when you were talking to Séamus, it was not always easy to tell whether you were getting advice or a telling-off, but that is the nature of straight talking. Maybe we need more of that in this place. May he rest in peace.

Mr McCrossan: I follow on from the tributes that have been made in the House and thank our colleagues across the Chamber for their very sincere tributes to the memory of a great man. We do feel it today. We have felt it since Friday. It is a very sore and painful point for us, because we know fully the commitment, dedication and life work that Séamus put in to bringing about these institutions, paving the path to peace and the Good Friday Agreement. He used his relationship with Hume to bring about a better future for everyone in this place. I speak as a member of the new generation of the SDLP. I am surrounded by many on these Benches who, in more recent years, have been lucky to enjoy the peace — the imperfect peace — that we have thanks to the vision and life work of Séamus Mallon.

I sat today in Mass and listened to the amazing tribute to his life. He had a profound influence on the life of so many of us. He is certainly a reason that I joined the SDLP. He is a reason that I love the SDLP. He is also a reason that I and others will be able to work and live together, side by side, across Northern Ireland. We will never see the like of Séamus Mallon again. He was a truly inspirational man and a man of peace and integrity. He was a man who was extremely blunt. I heard Dolores say that she liked straight-talkers: well, Dolores, as many will know, is quite a blunt instrument herself at times. *[Laughter.]* I felt that it was important to say a few words and to express my sincerest condolences to Orla, his son-in-law, Mark, and his little granddaughter, Lara, whom he talked about so often. He was a family man. He cared very deeply for them and loved spending time with them.

John Dallat struck a very strong chord with me in his contribution and tribute to Séamus. We have so much to learn from the man who sat on these Benches some years before us, working together and reaching out for the common good of everyone here. This is 'A Shared Home Place'. I put on record my heartfelt sympathies to Séamus's family and friends and to the entire constituency of Newry and Armagh, which will feel the pain of this loss very much. I thank the Members of this House. Today, as I stood waiting for Séamus's remains to come to the church, I was met by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and I watched as they walked down the road together. Today, I can say that I think that there is some hope for this place and for the future. I thank you for that very strong symbol you showed today. I am sure that Séamus is smiling down saying, "God, I can bring them together."

Thank you to everyone, those who attended and paid tribute. May he rest in peace.

Mr Catney: This weekend, I had business in Connemara, in a little town called Clifden. Clifden is the old seat of the British in the west of Ireland; it is an absolutely beautiful little place. During the summer, Séamus went down to open the arts festival there. As I walked around the town

over the weekend, so many people came up to me. They had fond memories of him. Yesterday, I rang my colleague Justin McNulty to try to convey that message on, but I was lucky enough when I got to the house this morning. When we arrived at the house in Mullaghbrack, it reminded me so much of where I come from: a little place outside Moira, Kilwarlin. That is also a predominantly unionist constituency. People here have spoken about the coming together of that community, but all of them came together to give him a fitting send-off in that place. Farmers opened up their fields; locals came out; the GAA club came out; and neighbours of Séamus, regardless of their religion, were there to help them. That fits into my feeling of this one community that we all are. I am very lucky and privileged to be here today.

Unfortunately, when you come after so many other Members, you maybe lose the chance to say something, but I, like Daniel, noticed our First Minister and our deputy First Minister — Conor, our Finance Minister, was also with them — down there today. That filled me full of hope. It reminded me of the story of that terrible incident — I do not really want to speak about it — when my neighbour, David Trimble, along with Séamus Mallon, walked down through Poyntzpass to the scene of the murder of those two young friends. I thought again what a gesture we had today. Séamus always filled me with this word, "Hope": today, I was filled with hope when I saw our First Minister and our deputy First Minister walking down that country loanin, for want of a better word, on the crossroads at Mullaghbrack. For that, I was glad to be at that service today. I rejoiced and felt uplifted to be there.

I also wish to pass on my sympathies to the Mallon family — to Orla, Mark and his little granddaughter — and to all my colleagues here who served with Séamus.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the tributes to former deputy First Minister Mr Séamus Mallon. I now propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 6.00 pm and invite Members to join me in signing a book of condolence.

The sitting was suspended at 5.28 pm and resumed at 6.10 pm.

Committee for Health: Deputy Chairperson

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed with the day's business, I inform Members that I have been notified by the nominating officer of the DUP that Mrs Pam Cameron has replaced Mr Gary Middleton as Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met. The appointment took effect on 17 January 2020.

Assembly Commission: Appointments

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

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Mr John Blair be appointed to fill a vacancy on the Assembly Commission. — [Ms Armstrong.]

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

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Mr Keith Buchanan be appointed to fill a vacancy on the Assembly Commission. — [Mr Robinson.]

Extension of Sitting

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

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 27 January 2020 be extended to no later than 9pm. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Ministerial Statement

Public Expenditure: 2019-2020 January Monitoring Round

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The monitoring round is the method by which Departments can return underspends for reallocation, identify pressures and manage their budgets. It is primarily about the reallocation of money already in the system, not the announcement of new money. With the end of the financial year fast approaching, we have a short window in which to spend reallocations. I have therefore moved quickly to agree this monitoring round with Executive colleagues and put the money back into the services where it can be used and where it is needed. The Assembly will have an opportunity to debate the financial position for 2019-2020 more fully when I bring the Budget Bill before the House in February. All Departments should engage with their Committees in advance of that, and I will discuss it with the Finance Committee when I meet it on Wednesday this week.

The top-line figures are that there is £35.8 million resource DEL and £5.8 million capital DEL available for reallocation. Those funds have become available from a combination of sources. Adjustments to centrally held funds, including Delivering Social Change, Atlantic Philanthropies, tackling paramilitary activity, EU match funding and reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) interest, have resulted in £1.2 million resource DEL and £0.8 million capital DEL becoming available for reallocation.

Adjustments to EU exit preparation costs have also provided additional funding for reallocation: £37.5 million was previously allocated to prepare for a no-deal exit. That funding was mainly provided as resource DEL, whereas funding required by Departments to complete the work was resource DEL and capital DEL. The outcome is an easement in resource DEL of £16.1 million, with a corresponding pressure in capital DEL of £16.1 million. We have subsequently received a further Barnett consequential on allocations of EU exit funding to Whitehall Departments. That additional funding, coupled with a small amount unallocated from previous provisions, results in £2.4 million being available. While the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education registered pressures related to EU exit preparedness totalling £2.7 million as part of this round, a no-deal exit has been averted, reducing the need for urgent funding. Consequently, the additional £2.4 million resource DEL has been made available for reallocation.

6.15 pm

Members will be aware that a commitment was previously given to provide an additional £28 million for the agreed pay settlement of 3% for Health and Social Care staff. The further £30 million required to award that pay increase has subsequently been provided for as an advance from the financial package accompanying New Decade, New Approach. In total, those central issues resulted in an opening pressure of £8.2 million on resource DEL and £15.4 million on capital DEL.

Reduced requirements come to £42.8 million in resource DEL and £21.9 million in capital DEL. Full details are provided in the tables that accompany the statement. In resource DEL, the Department for Communities declared

£12.3 million relating to welfare reform mitigation and £6.7 million relating to housing benefit. For welfare mitigations, that is primarily due not to a lack of uptake but to the fact that people have been successful in their appeals, leading to the mitigations being refunded when their benefits are restored. The Department of Justice declared a reduced requirement of £3 million relating to the unpredictable nature of the timing of high-value compensation payments. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs declared a £2.6 million reduced requirement, reflecting the demand-led nature of bovine TB compensation.

Reduced requirements totalling £4.3 million have been declared by a number of Departments in relation to the £37.5 million in EU exit preparation funding provided earlier this year. The fact that a no-deal exit has been avoided means that departmental requirements have reduced. On capital DEL, the most significant reduced requirements include an £8 million receipt from the Department for the Economy relating to an additional Presbyterian Mutual Society loan repayment. The administrators of the Presbyterian Mutual Society loan book continue to make good progress on the disposal of assets in line with forecasts. The Department of Finance has experienced delays in a number of capital projects, including agile working. Finally, DAERA has returned £2.7 million related to slippage on waste management programmes.

Departments have some scope to reallocate resources internally. Movements of money across spending areas in excess of £1 million are subject to the Executive's approval. In some instances, Departments also seek permission to move allocations across spending areas to facilitate the transfer of responsibility for a particular function from one business area to another. The internal reallocations agreed by the Executive in the monitoring round are also included in the tables for information.

For a number of reasons, Departments may also seek to reclassify expenditure from resource to capital or vice versa. All such reclassifications need Executive approval and are subject to overall budgetary limits. The approved reclassifications are shown in the tables accompanying the statement. Once all those issues were taken into account, the Executive had £35.8 million resource DEL and £5.3 million capital DEL available to allocate.

Before turning to the mainstream allocations, there are other important issues that I would like to highlight to Members, starting with ring-fenced financial transactions capital (FTC). In 2019-2020, some £244.9 million of ring-fenced financial transactions capital was available, including access to unspent funding from 2018-19 of £52.5 million. The 2019-2020 Budget announced in February allocated £140.5 million. However, reduced requirements have been declared: £38.8 million was declared previously, and, as detailed in the supporting tables to the statement, a further reduced requirement of £63.5 million in relation to higher education loans has been returned in the monitoring round. While some small allocations have been made from that ring-fenced funding, the Executive will finish 2019-2020 with £150.8 million of ring-fenced financial transactions capital DEL unallocated and, therefore, lost to the Executive. Our capacity to identify suitable projects that can spend all the ring-fenced financial transactions capital available to us remains an

area of concern. I have asked all ministerial colleagues to actively seek opportunities in their Department to utilise the funding through loans or equity investments in the private sector. I intend to address urgently the uptake of financial transactions capital.

I will now detail the allocations of the £35.8 million resource DEL and the £5.3 million capital DEL. Many children need additional support to help them to learn. I have allocated £10 million for children with special education needs (SEN). That will help to address the backlog in SEN assessment and diagnosis and cover costs such as transport and educational support. I have allocated a further £19 million for the Education Authority to meet the shortfall in contractual pay costs for teachers and non-teaching staff in 2019-2020.

Members will be aware of the contaminated blood scandal. In the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of people with haemophilia, including children, were given blood infected with hepatitis C or HIV. Payments for survivors here are lower than in England, and New Decade, New Approach includes a priority to:

"bring about parity in financial support".

Today, I am providing the Department of Health with an additional £1 million to increase financial support for people affected by the contaminated blood scandal. That will help to alleviate the financial hardship experienced by many of those affected.

The historical institutional abuse (HIA) inquiry reported on the 20 January 2017. I apologise to colleagues for the misprint in their copy of the statement, which reads, "20 June 2017"; it was actually 20 January. I want to correct that. It is long overdue, but I am glad that a way forward has now been found to address the recommendations in that report. I am awarding £0.9 million resource DEL to the Executive Office for preparation costs in taking forward the recommendations of the historical institutional abuse inquiry and victims' payment service scoping study. That will ensure that it is well placed to begin making payments. The Executive Office will receive £0.3 million capital DEL related to the capital costs incurred in taking forward the recommendations of the HIA inquiry.

Other allocations are detailed in the tables and include £3 million resource DEL to the Department for the Economy to honour a commitment by the previous Executive that further education (FE) colleges would have access to year-end underspends in order to help manage the impact of the difference between the financial year and the academic year; £1 million resource DEL to the Department for Infrastructure for the provision of winter services; and £0.9 million resource DEL to the Assembly for the increased costs associated with a fully operational Assembly and Executive in place for the last quarter. It also includes budgetary cover for Members' salary costs and ministerial salaries, restored to their correct level under the provisions of the 'Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination 2016'.

On capital DEL, the Department for the Economy will receive £1 million for minor capital works in FE colleges. The Department for Infrastructure will receive £3.8 million capital DEL: £2 million for the Belfast transport hub flagship project and £1.8 million for the replacement of failed and unsafe street-lighting columns.

All funding currently available has now been allocated. While there remain pressures in Departments, it is hoped that those will be manageable throughout the remainder of the year. We will continue to keep the financial position under review in the short time remaining before the end of the financial year. I commend the January monitoring round outcome to the Assembly.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome him to his appointment. We look forward to working with the Minister and his Department and hope that the teething problems that we have had so far around the provision of information will prove to be just that; indeed, in the spirit and intent of New Decade, New Approach, we look forward to working cooperatively with the full openness and transparency that you have expressed that you wish to work for as well.

Will the Minister set out how, over the past few years, in the absence of a Finance Minister, the initial year-on-year budget allocations were arrived at and how in-year monitoring has been carried out so far?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Chair of the Finance Committee for his remarks. I assure him that it is the intention — I believe it to be the intention across the Executive — to ensure that we work as collaboratively as we can with the Committees that scrutinise Departments. The Committees play a vital role not only in providing accountability to Departments but in assisting in policy development and providing advice. Therefore, it is in all our interests that there is a good collaborative arrangement between Departments and the Committees that provide that scrutiny.

Obviously, over the past three years, we had a process that was largely carried out internally in the Civil Service, with legal cover, if you like, being given at various times by the Secretary of State in approving Budgets, and, within that, the financial allocations were made in-year. Thankfully, we now have, in monitoring round terms, a relatively small allocation at the end of the year. That is, perhaps, indicative of two things: that there is less money in the system and that Departments are spending it better, which is to be welcomed. Certainly, the fact that there is less money in the system means that the allocation this time is probably well reduced. We are now, thankfully, back to the situation in which a monitoring round allocation will be brought to the Assembly for comments and to the Finance Committee for its scrutiny. I am certain that most people will welcome the fact that that will be the pattern for going on.

Mr Frew: I also thank the Minister for his statement and congratulate him on his appointment as Finance Minister. I too give him this commitment: we will work constructively together in order to make lives better for the people of Northern Ireland.

Will the Minister explain in detail the reasons why the Executive have £150.8 million of ring-fenced financial transactions capital DEL unallocated and therefore lost to the Executive and, by extension, the people of Northern Ireland? Has that amount anything to do with the Minister's party colleague, the previous Finance Minister, walking out on his job without first putting in place a working budget?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his kind words. I am not surprised that he moves quickly on to business beyond

that, but that is what I expect from him, knowing him in the Chamber over the past number of years.

I agree with the concerns expressed in relation to the financial transactions capital. Any time that the Executive end up giving money back to Treasury is a matter that all of us should be concerned about, because we have limited enough finances as it is, and we want to ensure that we spend and get the maximum benefit from every pound that the Executive have to spend, so the idea of £150 million-plus going back to Treasury is something that concerns me. Obviously, it has arisen at the end of this financial year; we are only getting a sense of how that is and where it came from. Financial transactions capital is very limited. It is not like the other moneys in the system that can be more readily reallocated; it is very restricted in how it can be spent. Nonetheless, it is not acceptable that that amount ends up getting returned.

I do not believe that it was the responsibility of my predecessor, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, but I would welcome work with the Committee on this and, particularly, with other Departments. I have asked and will ask Executive colleagues to ensure that this type of resource is spent to its fullest extent in their Departments. We have also asked the Strategic Investment Board to work with Departments to make sure that we do not end up in a situation in which this type of money has to be given back at the end of the year. I hope that we will see significant improvement when we come to the end of the next financial year.

Mr McHugh: Ba mhaith liom fosta comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leis an Aire as a phost nua. I congratulate our Minister on his new post as well.

It is always a welcome opportunity when there are additional funds for reallocation, irrespective of what source it comes from. In particular, I would like an update from the Minister on one of our flagship projects: the A5. The A5 is important in many ways in the area where I live, not least in opening up the north-west region and helping us to reach our full potential. In recent weeks, I have realised the importance of the A5 when attempting to make my way home to the outer regions of west Tyrone and Castlederg. It is difficult driving down that road each and every evening; your heart is in your mouth. I look forward to the development of that project.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat to the Member for his kind words. He is correct, of course: the A5 was mentioned in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. It is an Executive flagship project. I was involved in it in a Ministry for which I previously had responsibility, so it is disappointing that it is still going on. As I said, it is a flagship project. I am sure the Infrastructure Minister would be best placed to give the Member an update on the timetable for construction, but we are aware that the issues that caused the delay in that scheme were not necessarily due to funding. Other matters held it up, but there is a commitment to it from the Irish Government, who have reconfirmed their commitment to deliver on the £75 million of funding up to 2022. Certainly, it is an Executive flagship project, but I imagine the Infrastructure Minister could give you more information on the timescale.

6.30 pm

Mr McGrath: I join other Members in congratulating the Minister on his appointment, and I wish him well in his role.

I notice and welcome the inclusion of additional finances for the Executive Office for historical institutional abuse victims. I am sure that many would agree with me that they are among those for whom we should be prioritising our efforts. Will this investment allow for an indicative time frame for when those payments can be made available to those victims?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his comments. Implementing the legislation on historical institutional abuse is estimated to cost between £25 million and £60 million in 2021. Work is ongoing with organisations connected to the abuse, to discuss how they might share these costs with the public sector.

The scheme is set to have a sizeable long-term financial impact, but the exact amounts will be hard to predict accurately until it begins to operate, and the Executive Office, as the Member understands, is taking forward the refinement of the cost estimate. The Executive Office will essentially be responsible for timetabling. What we are trying to do is enable that and facilitate it by providing some additional resource. I hope that when the First Minister and deputy First Minister answer questions, they will be able to give some more detail on the time frame.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the restoration of the monitoring round facility and thank our civil servants for the work that they did in the absence of this financial instrument.

I welcome the £10 million to help address severe pressure on special educational needs provision, but I ask the Minister why the Department of Education has been allocated only £19.1 million of its £34.8 million bid for teacher pay. What is the implication of this funding gap, and when will the Executive allocate adequate funding to settle teachers' industrial action?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his comments, and I agree with him in terms of the gratitude due to the people who kept this work going over the last three years. I have made similar remarks to the staff in the Department of Finance.

The £19 million that we have allocated as part of this monitoring round is to meet contractual pay costs for teachers and non-teaching staff in 2019-20. It is not sufficient to settle the industrial dispute over pay awards for 2017-18 or 2018-19. It is not intended to do that. It is really an issue of the contractual costs that already exist and trying to address those.

Obviously, when we set the Budget next month, there will have to be a further discussion in relation to the outstanding pay issues. I know that, as part of the New Decade, New Approach, commitments were given on the part of the two Governments to resolving those issues. We also have commitments that we are required to give to civil servants, because they have pay issues as well. That is why my focus over the last two weeks has been on trying to ensure that the Governments live up to the commitments that were part of that agreement. I hope that we will be in a position to feed that into the Budget discussions we will have, so that we can have fair pay for all our public servants.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement this evening. While we all appreciate the challenges of the limited amount of money available in this monitoring round, and obviously the competing priorities of all Members, we

are all aware of the deterioration of the roads network. It is disappointing that the roads maintenance bid was unsuccessful in its totality. While I welcome the allocation to winter services and street lighting, that does not go far enough to cover either of these services.

Will the Minister give a commitment in the forthcoming Budget to prioritise resource in those areas?

Mr Murphy: I accept what the Member says. Obviously, there is a very limited amount of money to give out, and we are trying to spread it as best we can. We have been fortunate thus far — although it was snowing at home when I was leaving this morning — that the winter has not been so bad. We have allocated some money, as you say — £1 million — for winter pressures. The Infrastructure Minister obviously would have liked more, and she has written to me. I have written back to say that, if a situation arises between now and the end of the winter, we will try to find more resources to allocate if necessary.

Of course, going forward into the Budget scenario, there will be huge demand across all areas of spend, including roads. In particular, those of us who live in rural areas know all too well the troubles that we have in making journeys on small rural roads, so we will certainly try to work with the Infrastructure Minister to try to secure as much as we can, but it will be against a list of hugely competing demands. That is why my focus, early in my tenure of this Department, has been on trying to secure the necessary finances for across the Executive; so that, when it comes to these issues, we can talk about what we can allocate rather than what we have to save.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the allocation of funds to the Department for the Economy for minor capital works in further education colleges. FE colleges, such as the South West College in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, make a vital and valuable contribution to our communities. Will the Minister indicate how soon the Department for the Economy is likely to receive this funding?

Mr Murphy: Once the Executive have approved the funding, and it has gone through this process in the Assembly, the money immediately becomes available to Departments to spend. The Member is quite right: FE colleges play a vital role in education and in the economy. They train young people so that they have the necessary skills to match the requirements of the economy. When allocations can be made to them, we will certainly try to do so, but the Department for the Economy should have the money very quickly and be able to allocate it.

As you will understand, there is an urgency to spending this money: it has to be spent before the end of the financial year — the end of March. We will get allocations to the Departments very quickly, and we hope that the Departments get money to the necessary recipients as quickly as they can, and get the money spent.

Mr Givan: I note that the Department of Justice was able to hand back around £3 million, which, I am sure, will now be well spent in this reallocation. That said, I ask the Finance Minister whether the Department of Health put forward a bid to tackle waiting lists, given the existing pressures in that area. I do not see any bid for that money, and there may be a justifiable reason. Given the number of people — over 300,000 — on those lists,

I want a reassurance that the issue will be tackled by the Department and the Executive.

Will the Finance Minister elaborate on Translink's £19 million operating deficit, for which they have made a bid?

Mr Murphy: This is a very limited allocation of resources, which is to be spent within a very limited time frame. In fairness, one of the very first Ministers whom I met and who asked to meet me was the Health Minister. We had a sit-down within two days of the Executive being formed to discuss the real pressures facing the Health Department. As you understand and know, health is a priority for the entire Executive: we have made that very clear. When the Executive met last week, we had a discussion and reiterated that priority.

While there may not be a request for an allocation as part of this limited pot, there is absolutely no doubt, from my perspective, that the Health Minister and the Executive as a whole are determined to try to deal with waiting lists and broader pressures in the health service. The first priority of the Executive was to meet the health workers' pay demand, and we managed to do that. I would not read anything into the fact that there is no allocation for waiting lists; there is an Executive priority for all those pressures, which will be met.

I do not have the detail as to why Translink was asking for an increase, but I am happy to provide it to the Member at a later date.

Ms Mullan: I congratulate the Minister on his new role. I also welcome today's statement, particularly the commitment on special education needs. The number of children with special education needs is increasing year-on-year, which puts an already under-resourced budget at crisis point. It is estimated that, in order to stand still, £110 million is required for the provision of special education needs over the next four years. Will the Minister outline whether there are any plans to engage with the British Government on the issue and to ensure that they provide sustainable funding for future special education needs provision?

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that my focus and the focus of the Department over the last couple of weeks has been to do just that, although not specifically for special education needs. I understand that this allocation makes a limited but welcome contribution for people who are in that field to try to address some of those issues, such as the backlog in assessments, and to provide other support. The case is very well made for children who require that level of support.

Certainly, in the entire Executive, entire Assembly and, perhaps, even the entire population, there was a great expectation about what would be made available for us to deal with nine years of austerity and the impact that has had on our finances and our ability to provide public services to those most in need. My focus and that of my Department over the last couple of weeks has been to ensure that we can get the Government to live up to those commitments. If we can get that, and I sincerely hope that we can — we had a very productive discussion last week with the Treasury — I would hope that we would be in a position to allocate more resources to those very necessary front-line services, particularly those that deal with the most vulnerable in our society.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you for your statement, Minister. Others referred to the Department for Infrastructure and its requirements. We know that, in recent years, there has been a significant shortfall in overall funding. Has any risk assessment been done of the impact on road safety of reductions to road gritting and street lighting? How does that feed into the deliberations about the allocation of funding?

Minister, I do not know whether you want to take the opportunity to let us know how you got on with the Treasury last week. Were you able to squeeze any money out of it or not?

Mr Murphy: On allocation, I entirely agree with the Member: all services — I include Roads Service and Department for Infrastructure services generally — have suffered the same as everyone else. If we have nine years of austerity budgets, you cut, cut, cut until you are back to the bone, and with a whole range of services, we are literally back to the bone. That is why it is so important that we secure additional finance.

The Department for Infrastructure will have made its bid and its case, as a whole range of other Departments did. I understand, and I quite readily accept, that the Infrastructure Minister is not entirely happy with the limitations of her allocation. I assured her by writing to her to say that if pressures arise as a consequence of the winter months, we will try to find additional resources for her. I hope that provides some reassurance, but, in the longer term, you are quite right: we need sufficient resources across all Departments to ensure that we can provide public services, including those that have a direct impact on people's safety as they travel round the roads.

Yes, we had a productive meeting with the Treasury, but I am long enough in this game to know that one swallow does not make a summer. We intend to do the work that the Executive task us to do. That involves Departments actually collaborating with us and bringing forward, very tightly costed, the propositions that were made in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. We will get that work together and then go and talk to Treasury about the allocations that we believe that we are entitled to as a consequence of that. So, there is more work to be done, but it was the opening discussion, and it was productive. We will take it from there. I hope it is productive, because it is not just about getting money to this institution and the Executive: this is about getting money out to front-line services to things that have a direct impact on people's safety, including as they travel around the roads and remain on waiting lists and a whole range of other issues that are huge pressures.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his statement and wish him well in his tenure as Finance Minister.

Mr Frew already pointed out that £150.8 million is to be lost to the Treasury in unallocated financial transactions capital. Given that Ulster University's new Belfast campus is running at a projected £100 million overspend, is there a potential match there?

Mr Murphy: I am sure it is not the only one that you could match the figure against. The question is whether you can match the allocation, and financial transactions capital is very restricted in how it can be reallocated. It is not satisfactory that so much of it has not been able to be spent. As I said, I asked my departmental officials to

work with officials from all Departments and the Strategic Investment Board to improve that so that, when it is allocated to Departments, they actually ensure that they get it spent.

The project that you mentioned is hugely important for the whole Executive. The sum may fit neatly, but as for being able to allocate that money across, I am certain that if we could have done that directly into capital funding, we would have done, but we could not. It is restricted in how it can be spent and reallocated. Nonetheless, the Ulster University project is hugely important, and I am sure that, when we come to set the Budget in the next month or two, there will be many arguments around priorities in that regard, and it will be one of the issues that will be considered.

6.45 pm

Mr Buckley: First, thank you, Minister, for making good on the commitment to find additional funding for the victims of contaminated blood. Any of us who have spoken to those victims know what it will mean to them today. We know the life-changing impact that the worst scandal in the history of the NHS has had on them, so I welcome that.

I draw the Minister's attention to the Department for Infrastructure and the £1.8 million for the replacement of failed and unsafe street lighting columns. Will he clarify whether that is just for unsafe lighting columns, as opposed to fixing the 8,000-plus street lights that have left many parts of our Province in darkness?

Mr Murphy: First, I thank the Member for his words on the contaminated blood issue. He was one of the MLAs who came to me directly to raise that, so I am glad that we have been able to make some contribution to try to ease the pain of those caught up in that terrible situation over many, many years. There is an ongoing inquiry in London, and I expect it to report within perhaps the next 18 months. Then, we hope to have some support across the board for all who were affected.

The allocation is for street lighting columns. That is what the Department for Infrastructure asked for. If there is a broader issue with street lighting, as there generally is — as all elected representatives know, there is always a broader issue with street lighting, which we all deal with daily — he needs to take that up with the Department for Infrastructure.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, I congratulate you on your appointment and welcome your decision to prioritise funding for special educational needs. The number of pupils with special educational needs has been rising steadily. Most attend mainstream schools, and support is primarily funded from school budgets that have been under considerable pressure for some time. I am sure that your announcement today will be welcomed throughout the sector and recognised as an indication that prioritising the needs of children and putting people first is uppermost in the Minister's approach to allocating funding. Does the Minister agree that investment in the potential of children today is a sound investment in growth and prosperity?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for her question. One of the tragedies of the fact that we have been dealing with reduced budgets is that the demand for services has risen at the same time, so it is a double whammy. While our funding allocations have gone down as a consequence of austerity — we are told that austerity is at an end, and we

will see what comes of that — demand for these services has risen significantly. Of course, there is a priority to get there. What we are reallocating in this very limited monitoring round makes a contribution, but it does not go all the way to fixing the problems. If we had sufficient resources, we would like to do so because, as I said, this is not just about an Executive spending money; this is about providing front-line public services to people who are most in need, and I cannot think of anybody more in need than children who suffer from special educational needs.

Mr Lunn: I also welcome Mr Murphy to his latest post. There is a paragraph on page 3 about the Presbyterian Mutual Society. We have not heard much about that for quite a few years, but the news appears to be encouraging, in that it has managed to sell another property and has repaid £8 million against a loan that it got from the Assembly. Can the Minister give us figures, or maybe furnish us with them subsequent to this sitting, to indicate how much of that loan is outstanding, and what is the approximate value of the properties that the Presbyterian Mutual Society still owns but has not realised through sale?

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member. Like me, he is long enough here to remember this issue coming up. When I saw it popping up, I had the same question: are we still dealing with this? I think that it was at the beginning of the Executive in 2007 that it came on to the books. This is reporting progress, which is welcome. I do not have the figures that he asked for, but I assure him that I will get them to him as soon as I can.

Mr Gildernew: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. Having met last week, along with the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee, one of the groups that represents the victims of the contaminated blood scandal, I particularly welcome his ability to find an additional £1 million for that. It is fair to say that the testimonies that we heard from those people last week were truly harrowing in relation to the extent of the difficulties it has created for them, both the lifelong nature of their illness and the severity of it.

When does the Minister expect the additional payments to commence?

Mr Murphy: As I said in answer to a previous question, once the funding package has been agreed by the Executive, it is immediately allocated to Departments. There is very limited time left in this financial year in which to spend, so there is an urgency attached to this, and my Executive colleague the Minister of Health will be making public his Department's plans for this funding shortly, so I look forward to that.

Mr Durkan: I am hopeful that this new mandate will see a new approach to monitoring rounds. It is imperative that we, as Committee members, if we are to do our jobs properly, get sight of departmental budgetary positions and bidding priorities in advance of monitoring rounds. That could not be the case this time, but it would be very helpful going forward, not just for members of Committees but for all Members.

Under "Reduced Requirements", I see that £0.3 million for a Foyle suicide prevention project is being handed back. I am not exactly sure how that came about — I would not be surprised if the Minister is not either — but, given the very welcome pledges from the new Executive last week on mental health and suicide provision, can I be so bold as to

ask the Minister for a commitment to consider favourably any future bids for that project?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his comments. He is correct. We are two weeks into this, and the monitoring round had to be brought forward. There is an urgency to get it approved in order to get the money spent, so we do not have the time that we would normally like to have.

I had a conversation earlier with the Chair and the Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee to assure them that we are looking to try to get maximum input and transparency on all these matters. Collaboration and cooperation with the Committees, and MLAs generally, will be important. As I said, there was a discussion last week with Executive colleagues, and there is a real intent to try to make this as workable as we possibly can right across the board, and I welcome that.

Clearly, mental health is a key priority. I am not sure, as the Member anticipated, of the specific reason for the reduced requirement for that project, but I can certainly try to get him some answers and write to him on that. This is about reallocating, as I said, a relatively small amount of money to be spent relatively quickly. There is a strong sense of priority right across the Executive, and mental health in general, trying to improve services and trying to make a real impact on the issue, which is becoming increasingly important across society, featured in our discussion last week.

Although I am sure that he would like me to, I cannot make for certain a commitment on that specific project, but if it fits within the overall ambit of mental health services, there is a commitment across the Executive to try to support them and to allocate as much resource as we can to them in the time ahead.

Mrs Barton: Minister, I also wish you well in office. After a wait of 15 years, the new build for Devenish College has eventually started. However, I notice in the internal reallocations that £2 million has been removed from its budget already. Will the Minister please advise as to why that has happened?

Mr Murphy: Again, I apologise. I am not sure of the specifics of why that is the case. Towards the end of a financial year, we find that contracts may not have been awarded as quickly as they could have been. There may be other reasons for delays. Capital projects in particular can run into unforeseen snags. If a Department is not certain that it is going to spend the money for a project by the end of the financial year, it should surrender it for reallocation. There will be future money for such projects if they have been committed to, so the Department should surrender the money rather than hang on to it only to find that it cannot spend it, because that money will then go back to the Treasury, and that is the worst outcome. I do not know the specifics. Again, I will ask my officials to make a note of that and I will write to the Member.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his statement. Under "Reduced Requirements", the Department for Communities has declared £19 million in total from welfare reform mitigations and housing benefit. I also note that many people have been successful in their appeals, leading to mitigations being refunded, which calls into question the entire welfare system as it is. What does the rest of that relate to, as well as the significant budget going back from housing benefit, given the cliff edge that we

are facing in March? Does the Minister have any plans for the future funding of welfare mitigations past this financial year?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for her question. I welcome her to the Chamber; I have not had an opportunity to welcome her to her post yet. I hope that she has a successful time here. Her predecessor was a person with plenty of questions, so I presume that she will take up where he left off. I very much welcome her here.

As I said in the statement, in relation to welfare mitigation, it is not that there has been a lack of uptake; it is the case that people's appeals have been successful, which — I accept the point that you make — proves the nonsense of some of these so-called reforms, where they are trying to drive people unfairly out of benefits that they are entitled to. I am glad that the appeals have been successful, but nonetheless my colleague Ms Hargey has made announcements in relation to securing that mitigation package, because it is the biggest safety net that has been provided to vulnerable people anywhere in these islands. It is something that the Assembly and Executive can be proud of, even though we still disagree with the thrust of the welfare reform proposals that have come from London.

In relation to the Housing Executive, again, I do not have the detail as to where that has come from, but I will, of course, get some detail on that and write to the Member.

Mr Allister: Can the Minister bring some clarity to the issue of EU exit costs? In his statement, he said:

"£37.5 million was previously allocated to prepare for a no-deal exit. That funding was provided as mainly resource DEL ... The outcome is an easement in resource DEL of £16.1 million".

He later said:

"Reduced requirements totalling some £4.3 million have been declared by a number of Departments in relation to the £37.5 million in EU exit preparation funding provided".

He concluded:

"Consequently, the additional £2.4 million resource DEL has been made available for reallocation."

Can he square those figures?

Mr Murphy: I am sure that I can, although I may not have the time to do it in the context of this statement. Of the £4.3 million reduced requirements, DAERA surrendered £2.9 million; the Department of Justice surrendered £600,000; the Department for the Economy surrendered £200,000; and the Executive Office surrendered £400,000. The allocations were £4.9 million to DAERA for trade, inspection, legislation, policy and staffing; £2 million to the Department for the Economy for Invest NI; £2.2 million to NI Water for maximising chemical stock levels; £10.6 million for our roads, ports and infrastructure; £3 million for vehicle parts; £2.7 million to the Department of Health for medicines; and £3.1 million to the Department of Justice for policing. There is a range of expenditure.

Obviously, what we have is money that was allocated as a Barnett consequential for a no-deal exit. Thankfully, we did not have a no-deal exit, so it is a very welcome fact that the Executive and the Departments were able to hold on to

that money and reallocate it. If the Member has a specific requirement in relation to some of the figures, and if he drops me a letter, I will be very happy to respond to him in due course.

Mr Carroll: While people no doubt welcome the news that some worthy causes have been addressed in the announcement, I ask a question on behalf of Civil Service workers, who will be confused. Whilst they have been fighting hard on picket lines for the pay that they deserve — indeed, they were out last Friday — they have been told by the Department of Finance that the money was not there for them, yet here is a statement from the Finance Minister that tells of excess millions from the Stormont coffers for reallocation. They will be confused, too, no doubt, that a brand new deal was signed up to that did not mention their pay struggle and, seemingly, secured absolutely no financial commitments from the British Government. Will the Minister clarify for those workers whether their pay dispute will be resolved to meet their demands as a matter of urgency?

7.00 pm

Mr Murphy: If he is following this dispute, the Member should know that negotiations are ongoing with NIPSA. I met them last week. It would not be possible to make them an allocation as part of this because money has to be allocated now and spent before the end of the financial year. That is part of the negotiations. We are trying to negotiate the issues that arose from previous pay issues and to negotiate the pay and terms and conditions with NIPSA going forward. That is part of the discussion, and those negotiations began in earnest this week. This money was allocated in the middle of all of that, and it would not have been possible to allocate it across to that.

What we want to do is to get a financial settlement for this year so that we can address the issues that have caused industrial action and to get some certainty and security for the coming years so that people are awarded fair pay for the work that they do. That has been my commitment to the civil servants and the people in NIPSA going forward. That is our desire. There is a commitment to try to do that. I have officials negotiating with NIPSA, and, as I say, I met them last week.

The two Governments drafted the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. A range of issues are mentioned in it, and I assured the people I met from NIPSA and made them aware of the fact that, although their pay settlement was not mentioned, we did not draft it — none of the political parties here drafted it — that did not indicate any lack of a desire to try and resolve the issues that civil servants are facing. The Governments put down their priorities in relation to health workers' pay, and teachers' pay was mentioned as well. There is a desire to try and ensure the same for civil servants. All of us are aware that they have been involved in industrial action for some time. That will continue, and that is their right until they are satisfied with whatever the outcome of the negotiations may be.

The lack of inclusion of civil servants' pay in this statement is nothing to do with the fact that we want those negotiations to come to a successful conclusion. You could not allocate money in this round when we are in the middle of negotiations, because you have not agreed on what the allocation will be. My priority is to try and secure sufficient

resources to ensure that civil servants and all public-sector workers get fair pay for the work that they do and the contribution that they make to society here.

Ms Sugden: I wish to pick up on a point that Mr Nesbitt and Mr Frew made about financial transactions capital. My understanding — please correct me if I am wrong — is that FTC is a loan from Treasury to private-sector entities via a sponsoring Department and that there is an opportunity for that sponsoring Department to add an interest rate, which it can use as resource. It is disappointing that we are sending back £150 million and, indeed, interest, which, perhaps, is much-needed revenue for the Executive. I am interested to hear the Minister's thoughts about that as a potential revenue-raising mechanism and, indeed, whether it is considerable enough to make a dent in our finances.

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member's concern about that; it should be a matter of concern for us all. I am not certain that it is a significant revenue-raising option for us, but, nonetheless, if finances are allocated, we want to ensure that the Departments are using it all and that we do not end up surrendering any resources back to Treasury. That is a loss as far as we are concerned.

As I said, officials will be talking to all the Departments. We will ask the Strategic Investment Board to work with them as well to make sure that they maximise the use of that resource available so that we do not end up in a situation like this again next year.

Mr Catney: Mr Speaker, I apologise to you and the House for being late. Like an old pro boxer, I thought that there would be some sort of bell. *[Laughter.]* I did not hear the bell and was caught out.

I congratulate Mr Murphy on his appointment to the Ministry. I look down and I see £1 million being allocated for contaminated blood, but, alongside that, I see that the £5.2 million for the doctors and dentists has not come across. I would not like to think that this would in any way impact on the situation in our A&Es at the minute.

Just one other observation: when I did my accounts in my businesses, I was very lucky that there was a surplus. I was wondering if there was a way, within these two years —? I note that it is a one-year Budget. We need to move that to two years. Is there any way or any possibility of you trying to do that?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his question. Generally speaking, if you are a boxer waiting for the bell, you are in trouble. *[Laughter.]* Yes, of course, there are bids that are not met. Obviously, the contaminated blood issue is a hugely important one to address, and any of the Health bids and any of the bids from across the Departments are important. Departments make the case for them, and we try to ensure that the inability to deliver on that at this time does not have detrimental effects. Clearly, we do not want that to happen to Health.

The Member is correct: we want to get on to multi-annual budgets. That gives some certainty to Departments going forward. Mr Carroll mentioned pay for civil servants and, if we had multi-annual budgets, it would give some certainty to people on progression of pay, and that is the place we want to get to. We are waiting for Treasury to do a spending review. There is likely to be, based on discussions with Treasury — it is not certain yet — quite possibly a Budget in March, another Budget in November

and a spending review in between. All those things have an impact on how we do business here, and we want to get beyond that into a multi-annual budgetary situation. That is our very strong desire because, in that, you could give some certainty not only to Departments but to staff.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for two minutes until we change the top Table.

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

Executive Committee Business

Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to move the motion.

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

That this Assembly, noting the urgency of the issue resulting from the absence of legal powers needed to continue making direct payments to NI farmers in the 2020 scheme year, agrees that the provisions in the Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill, as introduced into the House of Commons on 9 January 2020, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has not allocated any specific time limit to this debate or to individual contributions. I call the Minister to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Poots: First, I declare an interest as recorded in the Register of Members' Interests. That applies at this time until I totally divest myself of interest in this matter.

Normally, I would have brought this motion within the established time frame, and I apologise to the House that that was not possible. We are under very tight time constraints if I wish to have the legislative authority to enable some £293 million to be paid in direct payments to farmers in the 2020 scheme this year.

The UK Minister for agriculture, environment and rural affairs wrote to me last Monday and asked that the Assembly provide legislative consent to Her Majesty's Government, legislating on our behalf on the Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill.

I will provide the House with some background. Article 137 of the withdrawal agreement disapplies the EU direct payment regulation, EU regulation 1307/2013, which provides the legal basis for the common agricultural policy (CAP) pillar 1 support to UK farmers, so it ceases to apply to the UK after the 2019 scheme year. The reason for that is that the 2020 scheme's payment would be made out of the EU 2020-21 financial year budget. That falls into the new EU multi-annual financial framework, to which the UK is not contributing. Therefore, if nothing was done to replace the EU regulation, there would be no legal basis for direct payment to UK farmers. The Direct Payments (Legislative Continuity) Bill corrects that deficiency.

The Bill is a UK Government Bill. It is a technical Bill of narrow scope that incorporates EU direct payments regulations into United Kingdom law. It provides the underpinning of direct support for the 2020 scheme year only. It will also create delegated powers to make subordinate regulations to ensure that this retained legislation operates effectively in a domestic context. The delegated powers in the Bill will enable failures or deficiencies in retained EU law to be remedied and for retained law to keep pace with any change introduced

into corresponding EU law during the 2020 scheme year if deemed necessary.

It is envisaged that the UK Agriculture Bill, which was introduced in Parliament last week, will provide the necessary powers from 2021 onwards, including the ability to keep existing schemes in operation until we have a replacement. I will bring forward a further legislative consent motion (LCM) on the Agriculture Bill in due course. You should note clause 3(4), which is for DAERA to make regulations to move basic payment entitlement values in Northern Ireland towards a uniform unit value, but this is a discretionary power and subject to the affirmative resolution of the House.

Agriculture is a devolved matter, but the provisions of the Bill extend to the whole of the UK. Therefore, it contains provisions that fall within the legislative competence of the Assembly. For that reason, DEFRA is seeking legislative consent from the Assembly in order to legislate on behalf of Northern Ireland. As I said a few minutes ago, I received the formal request from Minister Eustice in DEFRA last Monday night, so this is happening at pace. The Bill was introduced to Parliament on 9 January. It is scheduled to complete its remaining Commons stages tomorrow, 28 January, and the Lords stages on 29 January so that it will become law by 31 January, our withdrawal date.

With the Bill likely to be certified as a money Bill, the last stage at which amendments can be considered as it completes its Commons stages is 28 January. Therefore, legislative consent from the Northern Ireland Assembly needs to be provided no later than today. Without consent, the Bill may no longer extend to Northern Ireland, leaving us with no legislative power to provide for direct payments in the 2020 scheme year after 31 January. This timetable was confirmed to my officials only last Tuesday morning. I have taken all necessary steps to ensure that the Assembly is given the opportunity to consider it as quickly as possible. My officials briefed the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee last Tuesday, and I am grateful to the Committee for facilitating this briefing at short notice.

It is crucial that there is no gap between the ending of the EU legislative basis for direct support to farmers in Northern Ireland this Friday and its replacement with domestic legislation. The Assembly will be fully aware of the importance of this support to the farming industry. The Scottish and the Welsh Governments are also moving with speed through the necessary processes to ensure that legislative consent for the other two devolved institutions is also in place. Both devolved institutions have now given their consent — the Scottish Parliament on 16 January and the Welsh Assembly on 22 January.

I should also inform the House that DEFRA intends to lay the two statutory instruments in Westminster on 31 January via the made affirmative procedure under the Bill so that they come into effect immediately after 31 January to address the failures and deficiencies arising from the EU law.

I want to say something about the funding of direct payments. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced at the end of December 2019 that the UK Government confirmed that they will provide the same financial support to CAP pillar 1 for 2020 as for the 2019 scheme year. That provides Northern Ireland with some £293 million for the

2020 scheme year. That funding stream is ring-fenced in the block grant. It cannot be spent on anything else. It is very positive news, and I now need the legislative authority to be able to use this funding.

To sum up, my view is that the Bill's provisions should extend and apply to Northern Ireland to ensure that the direct payments can continue to be made to farmers in Northern Ireland for the 2020 scheme year. I commend the motion to the House.

7.15 pm

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I would like to take the opportunity to reflect the views of the Committee.

Minister Poots outlined the background to the issue, including the concerns about the continuation of payments to farmers. The matter needs urgent attention from the Assembly. For that reason, the normal procedures used for legislative consent, as set out in the Assembly's Standing Orders, have not been followed.

The Assembly's Committees were formed only last Monday. Nevertheless, the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee deemed this matter to be of such urgency that it met for the first time one day after it was established, on Tuesday last week, to consider the matter. We were able, at very short notice, to have departmental officials before the Committee to answer our questions. That session was extremely informative and very helpful, and I want to place on record our thanks to the officials for making themselves available at such short notice. I should also say at this point that the Minister, the Deputy Chairperson and I met on Monday 20 January, when the Minister outlined the special circumstances for the LCM.

The Bill provides the legal basis to allow DAERA to continue to make direct payments to farmers by ensuring that the scheme continues for the claim year 2020. To that end, it has a sunset clause built in. The Bill also gives a power to allow DAERA to continue moving towards a uniform rate of payment entitlements, and I will cover that in my later comments.

The importance of the direct payments to farmers must not be underestimated. For most farmers, CAP direct payments make up the majority of their income; in fact, last year, as much as 80% of farmers' income was the direct payments that they received in the subsidies.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Member agree that the uncertainty surrounding Brexit has created great anxiety among farming and rural communities? In light of the negative impact that that, potentially, is having or will have on mental health, will he commit, in his role as Chair of the Agriculture Committee, to work with the Minister to address that area of concern?

Mr McAleer: Thank you for your comments. Yes, obviously, the mental health of our farming community is a major issue. Members from rural backgrounds will be aware that farming is a very solitary activity, and that is compounded by things like poor farm gate prices, inclement weather and all other sorts of pressures. I had my first meeting with the Minister last week, and he shared with me that this is a common priority. You, as Chair of the

Health Committee, will appreciate that mental health is a priority for me; indeed, the Minister highlighted it as well.

To qualify for direct payments, farmers must submit an application form and meet certain standards in environmental management, animal welfare and traceability. That is known as “cross-compliance”. At the Committee meeting on Tuesday 21 January, many members focused on ensuring that, for 2020 at least, the payments, the application process, the cross-compliance conditions, the inspection regime etc would remain as they are. The Committee was content to learn that that would be the case. As one member described it, “2020 would be a cut and paste of 2019”, and we were assured that there will be continuity. This is vital for our farmers as they try to plan how to run their businesses with so much uncertainty about the future.

Another focus for the Committee was the level of payments and the payment timetable, and we learnt that there would be some minor differences from what happened in 2019. Those minor differences should work in favour of the farmer. I will outline them, and the Assembly will see why no Committee member expressed or raised any major concerns about them.

To set the context, let me give you some information on the budget for the 2020 claim year. DAERA officials informed the Committee that the budget will be €329 million in 2020, as the Minister stated. An exchange rate of 2019, which was 0.89, has been used, which converts into a £293 million fund available to farmers. We were given assurances by the officials that the money coming from the Exchequer would be ring-fenced. That means that it cannot be used for anything other than direct payments to farmers.

On the minor differences that we spoke about, the Assembly should note the lack of what are called “financial discipline deductions”. Under EU rules, there are deductions from farmers’ payments of around 1.4% from amounts above €2,000. That deduction goes into an EU crisis reserve. The Bill has the power to remove that provision from retained EU law because it is no longer relevant. That will be done using a statutory instrument to be made available at Westminster, likely on 31 January 2020. The officials who came to the Committee pointed out that we will need to get to the end of the month with all the legislation tied down. Only then can the Minister give a clear picture to farmers of what they might expect for 2020, but I hope that that little extra will be available to farmers.

The second minor change that none of the Committee members expressed concern about is the payment timetable. Working under EU rules, in 2019, the Department had issued 99.3% of payments by December. As the payments will no longer be made under EU rules, the Department thinks that it might be able to get the vast majority of payments out earlier in the year. Currently, the Department starts making advance payments from the middle of October, with the bulk of final payments being made by the end of December. However, the Department is hopeful that, for 2020, it can make full payments from mid-October, a change that, if it happens, will be very welcome in the farming community.

At the beginning, I noted that the Bill also had the power to allow DAERA to continue to move towards a uniform unit of payment entitlements. That is in line with the trajectory that was set under the previous CAP reform in 2014. As most

Members will know, direct payments to farmers are based on land entitlements, and, historically, some entitlements were worth more than others. For the past number of years, DAERA has been moving annually towards equalising those entitlements, commonly known as the “flat rate”. The DAERA officials who briefed the Committee were able to tell us that 2019 is the last year of the decision period on the flat rate. Moreover, they have moved five sevenths towards a flat rate: they are 71.4% of the way there. The officials also noted that the Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill contains a provision to allow the Minister to continue the progression to a flat rate if that is what he decides to do. Such a decision by the Minister would require an affirmative resolution on a statutory rule, as stated previously.

The powers of the Department to make regulations can be found in schedule 2 to the Bill. When questioned, the officials noted that they could be used for two broad categories of regulations, one of them being to correct any deficiencies in bringing EU law into domestic law. Secondly, there is a group that will be about keeping pace with the EU during the transition period. For example, were the EU to bring forward some change to the 2020 scheme year, the regulation-making power allows DAERA to reproduce that in our local law so that it keeps us in step.

The Bill makes provision for payments to farmers in 2020 only. What happens after that is currently unclear. We know that agriculture is a devolved matter. Therefore, each devolved jurisdiction will be able to set its own policy. What those rules will look like has still to be decided.

The Committee knows that the Westminster Government introduced an Agriculture Bill just last week. We know that the Bill has provisions that will apply here and that a legislative consent motion will, at some stage in the near future, seek the consent of the Assembly. The Committee has not had a chance to look at the provisions of the Bill to consider what they might mean for our farmers. I imagine that it will in the near future.

We are also aware that the Department has been engaging with key stakeholders and the farming industry on what a future agricultural policy might look like. Moreover, Members will be aware that the protocol will have a deep and lasting influence on the future of agriculture policy. That is a policy matter that, I suspect, we will return to repeatedly in the coming months. The Bill addresses the issue of direct payments to farmers for 2020, which is CAP pillar 1 only.

What is also of particular interest to me and other Committee members is the question of continuation of funding to rural communities and other schemes, such as the environmental farming scheme and priority 6 schemes, which invest in the social and economic development of rural communities through a variety of initiatives. The vast majority of such funding comes through CAP pillar 2. The Committee sought some information on what will happen to that funding. All that we know is that it will continue in 2020. It is obvious that there are still a lot of questions to be answered here, and the newly formed Committee will pursue this in some depth.

As I come to the end of my speech, I emphasise that, under normal circumstances, the Committee would have had more time to consider the matter, take evidence and formally report its opinion to the Assembly. I am aware

that the Welsh and Scottish Assemblies had time to follow their procedures and give consideration to the matter and that both legislatures have given consent for the provisions of the Bill to extend to their jurisdiction. The extremely tight timescale has not enabled the Committee here to follow the procedures as set out in Standing Orders. Nevertheless, we have, as far as possible, adhered to the spirit of the Standing Orders. The Committee agreed, at its meeting on 21 January, that it was content to support the extension of the provisions of the Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill to this jurisdiction.

Those were my points as Committee Chair, but, before I finish, I just want to say a couple of points as a Sinn Féin MLA who represents the rural constituency of West Tyrone, which benefited from single farm payments of £43 million last year. It is important to point out — my colleagues will, no doubt, pick up on it — that the process that we are engaged in this evening — the LCM, the pressure to adhere to the Westminster timetable, the consequent pressure on the Committee to scrutinise this in a very short time and all of the associated uncertainty — is a direct product of Brexit, which the majority of people here in the North did not vote for. It is a matter of huge regret that, while the rest of the EU is now planning for the 2021-27 EU CAP, with direct payments, interventions in certain sectors and rural development as the centrepiece, we have been plunged into this uncertainty due to a Brexit that we did not want.

Mr Irwin: I congratulate the Minister and wish him well in his new office. At the outset, I declare an interest as a partner in a farm business that is in receipt of a direct payment.

First, I welcome the fact that we now have a re-established and working Assembly in order to address the many concerns circulating across the Province about a great number of issues. Not least among the farming and rural community, of course, is Brexit, the various arrangements that need to be put in place and the challenges that need to be met, as we move towards what, I firmly believe, will be a brighter future as we free ourselves from the many burdens that the EU has attached to the back of the hard-working farmer in Northern Ireland. Indeed, pointing to the potential for positive change going forward, I very much welcome the early indication from Minister Poots that he is minded to review the slurry-spreading arrangements in order to put in place a more responsive and, indeed, environmentally protective arrangement that, I know, will be very welcome in the farming community. That is only one example of where a local Minister can make local decisions that will benefit everyone.

On the issue at hand of the continuance of direct payments, I welcome the motion. Of course, as we noted in Committee, there is an acute urgency on the matter, and I welcome the fact that there was consensus around the Committee table on the need to get the matter to the Floor and see the business done. The fact that we are seeking continuity of direct payments will be of comfort to thousands of farmers across the Province, and they will welcome the fact that the legislation will pave the way for payments to be made without delay or difficulty.

Another important factor is the assurance that the exchange rates from last year will be used for this year's payments. That is a welcome assurance and one that will be well received in the farming community. It is important

that, as we continue the Brexit journey, we have some degree of certainty and an ability to absorb pressures and respond effectively. The legislation allows for that breathing space.

Thanks must go to the Department staff, who deserve praise, as we are the only region in the UK to make 70% of direct payments in October and the remainder in mid-December. This year, 93.3% of payments were made by the end of December, which is an admirable achievement. Farmers have also adjusted well to the online system, and Department staff have made impressive progress in processing times to be the best-performing region of the UK. That is no small achievement, and I reiterate my thanks on that point.

I look forward, in the coming weeks and months, to continuing to liaise and work with the Committee, the Minister and wider industry representatives on the agriculture Bill. I certainly will be doing what I can as an elected Member to put the interests of the farmer first and foremost. I support the motion.

7.30 pm

Mr Dallat: I extend my good wishes to the Minister. We worked together in the past; we had our spats, but we always made up, and I have no doubt that, in the greater interests of the agriculture community, we can work together.

I note that we have already had a number of declarations of interest, but I have no doubt that no one will be putting their snout in the trough for personal interest, because this issue is far too serious. It impacts on not only the agriculture community, but everyone, and I am sure that the Minister will agree that all of us need to put our shoulder to the wheel to enlighten and educate people on the wider importance of the agriculture community.

Yes, the legislation will offer short-term financial assurance. That is welcome, but people need to realise that, as well as making up a significant proportion of the income of farmers across the North, those direct payments — I heard the word “subsidy”, but I think we need to get rid of that because it is far more than a subsidy, it is an investment — are securing the financial viability of many farm businesses and rural communities. They also represent a significant incentive to improve environmental, public health and animal cruelty standards across the North and, indeed, Europe. Next week, we will have the opportunity to discuss climate change, the environment and how that relates to agriculture. I look forward to that.

The impact of any withdrawal of direct payments is even more serious than what I have said. Here in Northern Ireland, we have the best quality-assured farm products anywhere in the world, and I am sure that it has not gone unnoticed that some Members of the Westminster Parliament have been advocating the import of “cheap” food from Argentina and Brazil — and I have the word “cheap” in inverted commas. While the products might look all right, they are the result of deforestation; they are the result of animals being put onto land that is deficient in nutrients. All of us worry about our personal health, and that is an issue that impacts on not only those who own farms but the wider community.

In the limited time that I have available, let me mention one more issue. The farming industry is sustaining many

of our small towns and villages. When other people are at work, it is the farmers who are packing into the cattle mart and spending their money in cafes, shops and hardware stores, and giving badly needed work to the rest of the rural community. What is going to happen if these payments are withdrawn some time in the future? I worry about that, because there has been an erosion of our rural communities already, and we should be doing everything possible to sustain the agriculture industry, which is the heart of that community.

I have already mentioned the debate that we will have next week. I look forward to hearing the Minister on his plans for arresting climate catastrophe.

As soon as the results of the 2016 referendum became clear, the SDLP constantly pressed the British Government to make clear their plans to replace vital payments to our farmers. It is concerning to hear a former British farming Minister suggest, in the aftermath of the referendum, that the system of support may be abandoned. It is not new; it has been floated before, and we have been told that New Zealand is viable, and all sorts of things. But listen, we are not like England, with landlords and tenant farmers and wild horses that roam for miles. Our farms are mainly smallholdings, sustaining a way of Irish life and sustaining our churches, our schools and our communities. Indeed, colleagues, these payments, and millions more that we receive from the EU, are part of the reason that the SDLP was resolutely opposed to Brexit. We are a political party steeped in the rural community and understand the consequences of what is happening.

It is clear that the uncertainty caused by Brexit over the past three years has impacted negatively on many different sectors, not least farming. We have the opportunity today to provide some clarity to farmers across the North and to offer continued support over the next two years. We need to do that — we really do — and I congratulate the Minister on taking this initiative.

Given the urgency of the issue, resulting from the lapse of the legal powers needed to continue making direct payments to farmers across the North in the 2020 scheme, it is, of course, appropriate to take the action that the Assembly is taking tonight, but to bear in mind that this is only the first instalment of one battle that we need to win.

Mrs Barton: I also take the opportunity to congratulate Mr Poots on his appointment as Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

As someone who grew up on a family farm between Newtownbutler in Fermanagh and Clones in County Monaghan, just a few hundred yards from the border, I am very well aware of the difficulties of farming in challenging circumstances.

For some decades, agriculture has benefited from a level of support, whether it has come from our own Government or from the European Union. We have heard arguments in the past that this support is farmers receiving money for nothing, but, as we are all aware, that is not the fact. Farmers in Northern Ireland produce exceptionally good, quality products — some of the best that you will find anywhere in the world — while having to meet very difficult environmental, animal welfare and traceability standards that were introduced and implemented by the EU, the UK Government and agencies.

I am sure that we all acknowledge that, without the support mechanisms, it would be impossible for farmers to produce food products at a reasonable cost, as they currently do. As we come closer to the implementation of Brexit on 31 January, for Northern Ireland farmers, that also brings to an end the common agricultural policy, so direct payments will cease. This legislative continuity Bill will facilitate support for Northern Ireland farmers for this year from the EU's new multi-annual budget for 2021. Northern Ireland farmers are, however, still due this EU support for 2021 as these payments are made in arrears. This will maintain continuity of support for the local farming industry for this year, but for this year only.

Not contained in the Bill, however, is the answer to the question that everyone involved in the agri-food industry will be asking: what will the future hold for farmers in relation to support? Many fear for the future of the traditional family farm, a sector that supplies food not only for us in Northern Ireland but for many throughout the EU and beyond.

This is an important piece of legislation not only for the farmers but for the community of Northern Ireland. I assume that the legislative consent motion on the EU withdrawal Bill that the Assembly did not agree to last Monday will have no impact on this Bill or, indeed, on any other Bill that the Assembly decides on in relation to the UK withdrawal from the EU.

I support the Bill. I look forward to early planning and preparation for future arrangements to support the agri-food industry in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, before I call the next Member to speak, it is my obligation to remind the House that a maiden speech is made without interruption. I call Mr John Blair.

Mr Blair: Principal Deputy Speaker, thank you for that introduction, and may I, in the opening remarks of my maiden speech, take the opportunity, through you, to put on record my thanks to the Members who sought me out to say, "Hello" and "Welcome" when I was appointed in July 2018? You will be aware, Principal Deputy Speaker, that that was a difficult time — it was a time of uncertainty — but without going over old ground, I am relieved and encouraged now that, with the new agreement, we will all be able to work together and move this place forward. I pledge today to play as full part as I can and to work with all Members for positive outcomes.

My path to the Assembly was not, as some may have noticed, a rapid or marathon sprint or in any way an accelerated promotion. I came to the Assembly after many years in local government. I should thank those council officials and members of all parties with whom I worked. Indeed, that applies not least to my Alliance colleagues, many of whom are still there, for their support in sending me here and, of course, for the work that we do regularly as a team in the constituency.

I hope you understand, Principal Deputy Speaker, that I want to pay a genuine tribute to my predecessor, David Ford, for the work that he did for South Antrim, for the work that he did, of course, as a very effective Justice Minister and, most of all and on behalf of Alliance colleagues from across Northern Ireland, for the leadership and friendship that he has given us for many years and still gives us.

Now that I represent South Antrim, which goes from Toome in the north at the boundary with the Bann, to Glenavy in the southern end of the constituency, going through the towns of Ballyclare, Antrim, Randalstown and the many other towns and villages, I am told that it is traditional on these occasions to extol the virtues and attractions of my constituency. Of course, my constituency has far too many for me to list individually. I can only encourage Members to visit and, perhaps, keep visiting and revisit to see those attractions.

There is, however, one aspect of life in South Antrim that I will reflect on and formally acknowledge, and that is the most excellent voluntary and community sector that we have across my constituency. I suspect that is also the case in the constituency of colleagues. In my work first as a councillor and in my work as an MLA, I never cease to be amazed at the energy of the volunteers and activists and how they seek to work with and for others to make their area a better place. We should acknowledge that they add to the rich tapestry of community and society in our areas, but they do more: they provide an expert and valuable voluntary resource and knowledge that we should, with every effort ourselves, embrace in order to enhance that joined-up thinking and joined-up government that has been referred to so many times. We can improve that civic engagement between those volunteers and ourselves, work together to make our areas better and provide the joined-up government that we have talked about so often.

I now turn to the LCM. Whilst I am happy to endorse it, I would, of course, as I am sure you know, prefer that these matters were dealt with wholly by this Assembly, steered by the Committee and the Minister, with the appropriate emphasis on local impact. In the circumstances, on behalf of the party, I am happy to accept what is before us. With regard to the process, I think that I need to point out that, whilst the LCM and a certain date this coming Friday, and further LCMs and dates, may put some definition on an ongoing issue, they do not in themselves bring certainty to farmers, the agri-food industry and others who have current and real concern about the future.

I do not intend to rehearse in detail those concerns — they have been expressed by the Committee representatives — but I will go over in brief the uncertainty over funding that is separate to pillar 1. For example, the funding that covers environmental farming schemes; funding for future years in the context of the phrase, “Until we have a replacement”; funding to adequately support the promotion of the excellence of our products in Northern Ireland in a changing and competitive environment; general agricultural support post-Brexit; and a concern that recipients of funding for viable environmental farming schemes cannot apply in a separate tranche to help progress, add to or sustain their existing projects. I hope that we can look at those.

7.45 pm

Before I close, I want to point out that, for me, and, I am sure, for others, there is no hierarchy of need. There is no hierarchy of justification or merit. All areas of the farming sector and of the agri-food sector have equal need. This is our most vital sector. I am sure that the Committee and Minister will return to those matters in coming weeks. I am sure that the Minister will also take note of that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. May I be the first to congratulate the Member on making his maiden speech? It can be very intimidating to stand up and speak here for the first time. I am sure that all Members agree that he acquitted himself very well.

Mr M Bradley: I, too, congratulate the Member on his maiden speech.

The Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill gives devolved Administrations across the UK powers to administer direct payments to farmers for 2020. The Chancellor’s announcement confirmed the same level of funding for direct payments in 2020 as in 2019.

The Agriculture Bill will provide a new system of farm support towards an approach whereby farmers are paid public money for the goods that they produce, and it includes environmental themes such as enhancing air and water quality, tackling climate change and improving animal welfare. Leaving the EU means that we take back control of our agricultural policy and fund our farm payments domestically. As agriculture is a devolved matter, it falls upon us to ensure that farmers and the farming community are equipped with the proper finances to ensure sustainability and growth. The Bill enables current EU legislation that covers CAP direct payments to become part of domestic law.

Without that support, many of our farms would not have made a profit, so its continuation is vital to the industry. The Agriculture Bill, which will return to the Commons tomorrow, moves towards a new system that rewards farmers for enhancing the environment and for producing food in a sustainable way. The legislation enables direct payments for farmers for 2020, giving clarity and certainty to farmers and food producers as the UK leaves the EU on 31 January. After Brexit, UK tariffs and trade policies on animal welfare and environmental standards could influence where food comes from, its cost and how it is produced. Most importantly, the Bill ensures that farmers will endure no financial burdens as the UK makes its transition from the EU common agricultural payment structure.

Looking to the future, I feel that the farming community is the main custodian of the land and environment. UK contributions to the common agricultural policy are greater than the amount that UK farmers receive. That additional funding should be ring-fenced for agriculture and redirected to delivering greater efficiencies, increasing profitability and delivering high environmental and animal welfare standards.

I pay tribute to the staff, the Minister and the Committee for the hard work that they have put in.

Ms Dillon: First, I want to remark on the comment made by the Member for Newry and Armagh: that this will be of comfort to farmers. I can assure him that it will be of very small comfort. Coming from a farming background and understanding well the reliance that farmers, particularly hill farmers, have on these payments, I do not think that the one-year assurance will be a massive comfort to them, to be fair.

We will support the LCM, because not to do so would mean that farmers across the North would not get their direct payments in 2020. However — it is on record — my party is opposed to Brexit. One of the many reasons for that is the potential damage and uncertainty that it will

bring to the agricultural sector. Every year, over £300 million of payments comes from the EU to farmers and the agricultural sector in the North. This is vital for the North's economy.

It is vital for the sustainability of our rural communities, including farmers in my constituency of Mid Ulster, which is a large, rural constituency.

I forgot, at the beginning of my remarks, to congratulate you, Minister Poots, on your new position. Edwin was on the AERA Committee when I was its Chair, and we had many's the discussion around Brexit, I can assure you. In the wake of the referendum in 2016, I met many across the sector. Farmers made it clear that the promises from those trying to sell the benefits of Brexit needed to be adhered to and that they needed guarantees around payments. I was honest with them and told them that there were no guarantees. That is what Brexit removed from them: any guarantees of payments or any other kind of support. Whilst they may well be a priority for this devolved Assembly, I did not believe that farmers here would be a priority for any British Government.

Farmers absolutely deserve certainty around future payments. The British Government have publicly stated that they are committed to making the payments over the five-year period of their Parliament. Farmers and the agriculture sector as a whole will, no doubt, have witnessed the same British Government give a financial commitment to our public services here in the North only a few short weeks ago in the New Decade, New Approach deal, only to renege on it immediately. They, like the rest of us, are extremely sceptical about any commitments that this British Government make, so, while I welcome the payments for this year, it is vital to our economy here, in which the farming sector plays such an important role, that the British Government commit to certainty of payment well into the future and that the Assembly play its part in the legislation that makes it happen. The Assembly will also play an important role in making sure that future payments are designed in a fair and equitable manner and that the application process and enforcement process meet the needs of our local industry.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Caoimhe Archibald.

Dr Archibald: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your post. I also congratulate the Minister on his appointment and look forward to working with him.

The LCM, which I support, will, if passed today, bring some relief to farmers across the North that their payments will be made this year. That, of course, is to be welcomed. What the LCM signals, however, and what we now face are the very real and tangible consequences of the Brexit that will happen at the end of this week. For some, Brexit happened immediately when the referendum result was announced, with cancelled contracts and delayed decisions, but, for many, three and a half years of uncertainty and non-answers have been a reality, and we will now witness the unwinding of a relationship that has been built up over more than four decades. The European Union placed a priority on farming and protected it for decades through the common agricultural policy. We now face the uncertainty of what will replace that and whether or not it will be adequately funded. I, for one, have no great

confidence that it will. We have clarity for this year but not going forward.

Our farming and agri-food sectors are vital to our economy and to the fabric of our communities. They require investment and support to deal with the consequences of Brexit and the challenge of farming more sustainably in the light of the climate crisis. It is therefore critical that there be adequate funding to replace the EU funding that is being stripped away; that policy and funding support sustainable farming and the family farms that have been custodians of the land for centuries; and that any necessary interventions to deal with the consequences of Brexit be made.

As the European Union and the British Government negotiate the future arrangements and trade deal, Sinn Féin will continue to make the case through the institutions, as well as diplomatically in Brussels, Dublin, London and Washington, that there should be no barriers to trade; that regulatory alignment is in the best interests of producers and consumers, North and South; that citizenship and workers' rights must be protected; and, of course, that access to labour is vital for our farming and agri-food sectors.

Mr McGrath: It is good and proper that we welcome the Minister to his position and wish him all the best, but we should spread the love to you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, on taking up the role. We hope that the view is good from up there and that you will remember us down here. I look forward to your decisions and, of course, to abiding by them and following them. *[Laughter.]*

I thank the Minister for his early action on this important issue. He recognises how important it is to farmers and how important the agri-food industry is to the economy across the North.

Members across the House will be aware of the vital importance of direct payments to farmers. Those critical payments make up a significant proportion of income and secure the viability of many farms and rural communities across the North, and acutely in my constituency of South Down. South Down has hill farming in the Mourne, the Lecale coastline and down as far as Warrenpoint. All those farming communities will welcome this debate and a positive outcome from the LCM this evening.

For many farmers, the issue of single farm payments is one of survival; it is about whether a farm is viable or not. I welcome the support, hopefully, of the House for the LCM to ensure the continuity of these payments. Not only are the payments critical financially for communities across the North, but single farm payments and EU membership have played a huge role in increasing environmental and public health standards, and we hope that that will continue.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he share my frustration at the missed opportunity to discuss the implications of Brexit with the agriculture industry over the past three years?

Mr McGrath: Absolutely. We are playing catch-up, and that is what we are doing this evening on a decision that needs to be taken as the clock counts down the last minutes. I would have loved to have had the opportunity over the last number of years to have these conversations, but, alas, that was not possible.

Single farm payments and the millions more in funding that we receive from the EU are part of the reason why the SDLP was resolutely opposed to Brexit and campaigned hard against it in 2016. As soon as the referendum result became clear, notwithstanding the fact that people here had voted to remain, the SDLP consistently raised the issue with the British Government and colleagues in Dublin and Brussels. We all knew that Brexit would have a detrimental impact on the farming community, and we saw the immediate negative impact it had on the agri-food industry. It was clear that much work was needed to assist the farming and agri-food community, and much more needs to be done.

It is clear that the uncertainty caused by Brexit over the past three years has impacted negatively on many different sectors in farming, and thankfully we have the opportunity today to provide some clarity to farmers across the North and continue the vital support over the next two years. I welcome the discussion tonight and hope that colleagues across the House will support this LCM.

Ms Bailey: Principal Deputy Speaker, I welcome you in your new role. I also welcome Minister Poots in his new role. As a member of the AERA Committee, I genuinely look forward to working with him over the few years that are left in this mandate, and I have no doubt that he feels the same about me.

Mr Poots: Hear, hear. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Bailey: I also want to condemn — commend him, sorry. *[Laughter.]* Freudian, Freudian. I commend the Minister for wasting absolutely no time in tackling the very weighty backlog that is in his departmental portfolio as a result of the last three years. It has been very encouraging to see him hit the ground running.

The pros and cons of the common agricultural policy and the arguments around them are very well rehearsed. Arguments in support of the CAP go into issues such as food security, good diversity in food and how it helps to protect our rural communities. The cons include issues around its encouragement of over-production, its wastefulness and that it leads to a small number of the population, including global corporations, receiving vast amounts of public funds.

For us in the Greens, we recognise that the CAP goes very far in protecting our agrienvironment. For example, it rewards the use of fewer chemicals, maintaining our natural habitats and protecting wildlife, but that is not what is being addressed today. Today, we are seeking consent to provide urgent and short-term financial relief and peace of mind to our farmers in the face of our exit from the European Union on Friday. If this LCM is not supported, payments to farmers may not be available to them when they wake on Saturday morning.

8.00 pm

What is of further concern is that the payments are being provided for only this calendar year. Departmental officials have made it very clear that there will be a sunset clause attached to the LCM. Our farmers have been extremely concerned and very vocal over their discontent with Brexit plans, or precisely, the lack thereof.

While the LCM will bring minimal financial relief, it brings no certainty for farmers. It brings no ability to build

on business plans beyond this year. The Green Party supports the motion.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bailey: In a moment.

We do that because it is not just our farmers and agri-food businesses who need that security, but all of us — everyone. We are in no doubt that the urgency and the chaotic process is not of their making; it is the result of the Brexit shambles, which does not have the consent of our people. That Brexit shambles has been compounded by the lack of political leadership here in Northern Ireland over the past three years, just when we needed it the most.

I call on the Minister to ensure that long-term sustainable plans are created for our farmers as a matter of urgency, and that those will be fully focused on the potential and the needs that are unique to us here in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I trust that you are finding this a scintillating debate for your maiden substantive chairing of these proceedings. I have no doubt that your many farming constituents in South Belfast will be expressing great interest. *[Laughter.]*

When we come to this subject, I have to make this point: I am sure that the Minister remembers, as I do, the hysterical scaremongering of Remainers that, if we left the EU, it would be the end of direct payments to farmers — the end of generous handouts from Brussels. Of course, today, we heard Ms Dillon, in her churlish support for Westminster legislation, repeat the fallacy that this was ever EU money; it was, of course, always the recycling to us of our surplus contribution. Under this legislation, instead of foolishly posting the money to Brussels and then getting some of it back again, we are putting ourselves in a position where British taxpayers' money will be paid directly to British farmers. That is a sensible, logical situation, and one, in fact, that saves, as we heard from, I think, the Chairman of the Committee, the top-slice administration cost that the EU put on single direct payments.

It is clear that the legislation was always going to come, because our farming community was not going to be left, as "Remoaners" wanted to peddle, without support. Here we have it abundantly demonstrated that that is so. Indeed, I note that, whereas the Bill is for one year only, there is an amendment tabled for tomorrow in the Commons to extend it to two years. I do not know whether that will succeed, but, whether it does or whether it does not, it is quite clear that hereafter comes the Agriculture Bill.

Now, the Minister said, if I heard him correctly, that he anticipates a legislative consent motion on the Agriculture Bill as well. That left me a little puzzled because the Agriculture Bill will provide a new system of farm support in England, which moves away from direct payments and towards an approach whereby farmers are paid public money for public goods that they produce, and criteria such as enhancing the air and water quality, tackling climate change and improving animal welfare will all be the informants in that. Whereas, in Northern Ireland, surely, we have been moving towards a transition, whereby the basic payments scheme entitlement unit value moves towards a flat rate per hectare. I just wonder where — we are getting ahead of ourselves — in the Agriculture Bill that is. Yes, it could provide for the system in Northern Ireland, but is the Minister anticipating not taking measures himself

in that regard? I remind him, indeed, that, in this Bill, there is a Northern Ireland-specific power to close a gap in the legislative framework, which gives him, as the Minister, the legal option of continuing to transition the basic payments system. Maybe he could tell us whether he is minded to do that because that would maybe complement where we are going with the Agriculture Bill.

There are obviously unfolding questions, but the certainty that this legislation brings to the here and now is to be very much welcomed.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way.

The LCM gives certainty in the here and now. A number of Members made the point about fears for the future, and that is certainly understandable. Does the Member agree that those making those statements are presenting a kind of future in which there is an almost cast-iron guarantee that a CAP, through Europe, would remain as it is currently? The Commission has already published legislative proposals to change the way in which the CAP operates, including a reduction in the budget for it. Therefore, there is uncertainty in the European Union when it comes to the CAP. At least now, through Brexit, we will be able to engage in a more democratically accountable system in the United Kingdom, as opposed to the EU Commission and the undemocratic nature that prevails there.

Mr Allister: Yes, the Member is absolutely right: under the new financial seven-year plan in the EU, agriculture is a diminishing call on the budget. Indeed, we all know that, in the EU, the primary call in the CAP is towards eastern and southern Europe, so it is diminishing in both respects. There is one thing for sure: as the Member said, there is no certainty on the future of CAP funding, but this gives us the opportunity —.

Mr McAleer: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: In a moment. This gives us the opportunity to provide certainty within Brexit and our sovereign control. By any book, that has to be a better situation.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Member for taking the intervention. The LCM has a sunset clause: it is for one year only. There was a communication from the European Council on 10 December that the CAP budget will be cut by 5% this year as a result of the UK leaving it, but it stated — it is there to be seen — that direct payments, interventions in certain sectors and rural development will still be the centrepiece of the CAP. Whilst we are looking around in the dark, we have one year of certainty, but there is no certainty about payments beyond 2021, what form the payments will take or what budget will be there.

I do not think that too many people I have met in the sector are certain that the British Government will ring-fence the additional £300 million over and above our block grant to replace the subsidy for farmers here. Quite rightly, it should not be referred to as a subsidy; it is to replace the farming support that has been provided by the EU.

Mr Allister: I know what the Council said: it said that it will remain a centrepiece, but it is the centrepiece of a diminishing pot. That is the reality, and, as the pot diminishes, the more prosperous areas of the EU will have even less call on it. The reality is that, had Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom stayed in the EU, going forward, government spending was that our slice of the cake was

getting significantly less as time went on. We are in a far better position to deploy our own moneys towards our own needs as this matter unfolds.

I have two other quick questions for the Minister. Am I right to assume that this funding will come under the category of AME funding? Secondly, in September last year, the Government accepted the recommendations of the Bew report, which referred to the allocation of farm support funding in the UK, and, as part of that, it was agreed that a greater share of the convergence funding — that was the uplift — and of the financial saving for direct payments that was given to the UK would, for the period from 2020 to 2022, be allocated to Scotland and Wales, while the corresponding allocations for England and Northern Ireland would simply be maintained. Is that still the situation? Has the Minister a view about that, and, if so, has he been communicating or will he communicate with the Department about that? One would have some concerns about some lagging in that regard.

Those are issues for the future, but they will affect this very important issue, because sustaining our farming community is of fundamental importance to our economy, and I welcome the fact that the Bill, to which we should consent, will bring certainty in the interim, with a view to further certainty into the future.

Mr Poots: I appreciate all the comments this evening and thank Members for taking the time to make their input.

I will deal with a few of the issues at the outset. I have spoken about mental health issues for rural dwellers on several occasions now with Minister Swann, and, indeed, on our instruction, officials have already been in discussion on those matters, because we see it as an important issue. I do not think the absence of Government in the last three years has helped anybody's mental health, rural or otherwise, and I welcome that we are now here debating and working on these issues. I do not see an awful lot of merit in complaining that we are having to do this process so quickly whenever the Assembly was re-established only in recent weeks. I do not think that that benefits anyone.

The European Union has come up quite regularly in the context of certainty. The one certainty I have is that, had we remained in the European Union, we would have been looking at a diminished payment going forward, because there was an agreement in the European Union that this CAP payment, which saw the more advanced regions and countries in Europe receive a larger share of the pot, would be equalised with the accession nations, which, as part of the negotiation the last time round, demanded equality and will get equality. As a consequence, farmers in Ireland will not receive as much money next year as they currently receive, and that would have been the case for Northern Ireland as well. People need to realise and recognise that. If farmers in France, Ireland and countries like that are to continue to receive the payments at the level that they currently receive, the only option that Europe has is that the countries themselves put more money in. I suspect that that will be a very difficult conversation.

8.15 pm

A number of Members welcomed my becoming Minister. I trust that that will still be the case in a year's time and at the end of this mandate in two years' time. I look forward to working with each and every one of you. I will attempt not

to rise to the bait on every occasion, and I will seek to be conciliatory on the odd occasion as well.

The Agriculture Bill was mentioned. It contains a Northern Ireland schedule with “keeping apace” powers. So, any policy change in Northern Ireland will require the Assembly to take forward a new Bill. I am not sure that the flat-rate payment is the most appropriate payment. Maghaberry Prison, for example, receives a payment in spite of not having any agricultural activity, but it does own land. It would be much more appropriate to look at how best we develop and support sustainable farming in conjunction with the sustainable environment.

That does not mean the pillaging of hill farmers. I believe that hill farmers have a vital contribution to make. They produce much good food, and they should be rewarded for doing that. A simple flat rate that does not take farming activities into account will not be an appropriate policy. We have to ensure that we move forward with equity and make every endeavour to support the farming community as widely as we can to ensure that everyone can get a slice of the cake.

Payment to farmers predates the European Union and the European Economic Community. Farmers in the United Kingdom received support to do this for many years prior to us joining the EEC. However, I look on it less as support for the farmer and more as support for everybody in the United Kingdom, because everybody benefits from good-quality food that is being produced at very competitive rates.

Mr Frew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Yes, in just a moment.

The fact that you could go into your convenience store on the way home tonight and buy two litres of milk more cheaply than you could buy the equivalent amount of water is a demonstration that you get very good-quality food at a very low cost. This extends not just to meat and dairy products but to fruit and vegetables and all of that. That policy has existed for many years: that we keep food at a low cost for families, and give some assistance to farmers to ensure that they can remain on the land and produce that food.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. I agree with everything the Minister has said about support for farming, for productive farming and for hill farmers. The Minister will know that we have woefully low forestation. Does the Minister agree that that has to be looked at, that we need to raise the number of forests and trees that we have here in Northern Ireland, and that forestation in the hill country helps the Northern Ireland population with planning and flooding issues?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for raising that issue. Certainly, we will look at carbon sequestration. One thing that can assist us in achieving that is the planting of more trees, and we will look at that.

We will endeavour to move, and to move quickly, on that course of work. I certainly would like to see more of Northern Ireland forested. We are behind other regions, but I should point out our hedgerows are well ahead of other regions, and we have significant benefits from that. Nonetheless, I believe in greater afforestation, and we will seek to encourage that both in the public sector and for people working on the land. We will continue to look at that course of work.

In Bew, we do not see any material change to Northern Ireland. We believe that we will be in the same situation on the back of that.

The Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill focuses on maintaining the status quo and providing continuity of direct payments for the 2020 scheme. People have talked about beyond that, and I raised this issue with the Prime Minister when he visited, and I raised it last week in a telephone conversation with Theresa Villiers. Northern Ireland produces over 10% of the food in the United Kingdom. If we get the payment on the basis of Barnett, which is 2.8%, that would be punishing Northern Ireland farmers and, indeed, the Northern Ireland community. So, agriculture needs to be viewed outside the Barnett formula.

I have not been rebutted in any way by the Prime Minister or, indeed, the Secretary of State at DEFRA. Therefore, I will retain the argument that this needs to be based on the produce that is coming out of Northern Ireland, and that agriculture needs to be looked at in a UK-wide context.

It is not possible for us to make equivalent provision on this issue through an Act of the Northern Ireland Assembly before exit day, so the Bill does not represent a policy change. It brings across legislation to allow us to continue to make those direct payments in 2020.

We are not following the conventional pathway for seeking consent because of the deadline that has been set. We do not want to do this in the future, and, where at all possible, we will not step outside the normal processes.

Farmers need reassurance, and we will be able to give them that for the 2020 year. Over the course of this year, we will work very hard to give them assurance for a long time and, if at all possible, to get something in place for a significant period.

Given the urgency resulting from the absence of legal powers needed to continue making direct payments in the 2020 scheme, it is appropriate for Northern Ireland to take provisions from the UK Bill. Should the motion pass, I will write to the UK Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to convey the Assembly's consent to the UK Government legislating on our behalf with immediate effect.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly, noting the urgency of the issue resulting from the absence of legal powers needed to continue making direct payments to NI farmers in the 2020 scheme year, agrees that the provisions in the Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill, as introduced into the House of Commons on 9 January 2020, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that in order to enable Committees to meet to address urgent business, the next sitting should take place on Monday 3 February 2020. An Order Paper will be issued after the Business Committee has met. The Business Committee is scheduled to meet immediately after the Assembly rises.

Adjourned at 8.24 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 3 February 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Private Members' Bills

Mr Speaker: I wish to make an announcement about private Members' Bills (PMBs).

Members will be aware that the current focus of our business is on providing time for Committees to conduct the vital scrutiny of the secondary legislation that Departments have laid over the past three years. At this early stage, I am also giving consideration to elements of how I manage Assembly business. I want the Assembly to be seen to be a platform for dealing with key issues affecting our community. The solutions to address those issues may often be brought forward by Ministers, but I want to ensure that Members also have the ability to be heard and to play their part in fulfilling the potential of the Assembly. That makes my role to determine the support arrangements to enable Members to develop private Members' Bills even more important.

Over recent years, the number of Members seeking to develop private Members' Bills has grown significantly beyond the capacity of the system, which was set up in the initial years of the Assembly; for instance, the number of proposals submitted in the first week after the 2016 election was 25, which is equal to the number submitted throughout the entire 2011-16 mandate. On previous experience, the average time to develop a proposal, produce a properly developed Bill and take it through the House is sometimes 22 to 24 months. Therefore, time is of the essence for Members to build on the momentum of the Assembly's return to be able to convert their ideas into possible legislation before the next election. In deciding my approach, I have taken both those issues into account, and today I am publishing the guidance for Members on PMBs. I will not go through all the details of the process here today, but there are some key changes to announce. First, the Bill Office will now contain an Executive Bills team and a non-Executive Bills team. That will ensure dedicated support for Members. Secondly, there will be an increase in the staffing of the Bill Office from seven to 12. Thirdly, support will no longer be provided on a first come, first served basis. All distinct proposals that meet the requirements of the process will be supported. Where several Members submit the same proposal, they will be encouraged to collaborate on it. Fourthly, all Bills that have not completed the legislative process fall at the end of a mandate. However, proposals that Members began working on after the 2016 election may be submitted. In addition, Members will have the opportunity to demonstrate that some of their previous work from 2016

— for example, any consultation process that they had carried out — can be carried over and does not need to be repeated.

On that basis, the window in which Bill proposals can be submitted will open from tomorrow, Tuesday 4 February, until Tuesday 31 March. That enables some time, particularly for newer Members to familiarise themselves with the process. After submission, the Bill Office will work with Members to refine their proposals until the end of April. In producing the guidance, I have sought to ensure that enhanced work and support are available for Members. I thank Assembly officials who have worked to put in place the new arrangements to support Members.

There is also a need to look to the future, so I am writing today to the Chair of the Committee on Procedures. In 2016, the Committee on Procedures began a review of the PMB system that it was unable to complete before the Assembly dissolved in 2017. It would be beneficial for that review to resume. In addition to considering the process around PMBs and the support provided to it in general, I am asking the Committee to consider a number of specific issues. They include encouraging collaboration amongst Members across parties by enabling more than one name to be attached to a Bill to lead it through the House. I am also asking the Committee to consider what provisions should be in place for Bills that Members draft and present themselves, independently of the Bill Office. Such Bills are, of course, in order, but I think that it is worth considering whether there is any inequity between Members who rely on support from the Bill Office and those who have access to independent or external support. There is also a public interest in ensuring transparency about how such support has been provided.

Finally, while I have been keen to ensure that there is a system that supports the rights of Members to bring forward legislation, I emphasise that Members must be mindful of their responsibilities. Taking forward a private Member's Bill requires diligence over a long period. Furthermore, the support for Members is provided through the public purse. I expect Members to make efficient use of that resource. They should not, therefore, submit proposals to develop a Bill lightly. I have given the Bill Office authority, if a Member does not meet the key milestones in the development process, to cease the development of that proposal, which will mean that it will progress no further.

Producing and enacting legislation is an onerous and time-consuming task, but it also offers the reward of improving the experience of those we represent. The arrangements that I have announced today are intended to provide a

positive opportunity for Members to make new law in the next two years. However, those proposals are likely to be coming alongside a full programme of legislation from the Executive. Members will note the indication from the head of the Civil Service to the Executive Office Committee last week that 11 Bills are expected to come to the Assembly before the summer. I have written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an indication of when they will come to the Assembly to announce the Executive's legislative programme and to give the Assembly the chance to debate it. Therefore, given the time pressures ahead, I suggest that Members seek to take advantage of the opportunity for them to pursue a private Member's Bill at an early stage.

Matter of the Day

European Union Withdrawal

Mr Speaker: I have received a request, which has been granted, to allow a Matter of the Day on European Union withdrawal. Mr John O'Dowd has made a request to make a statement under Standing Order 24 on Matters of the Day. Mr O'Dowd has been given leave to make the statement on EU withdrawal, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members 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'Dowd: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for the opportunity to address this important matter, which has happened since the Assembly and all our Committees last sat. While, understandably, everybody knew that it was happening, it is still of huge significance to our society, our island, these islands and the politics within which we work; in fact, I do not think that there has been a more significant political event on this island since the partition of the state almost 100 years ago.

At 11.00 last Friday night, after 47 years' membership of the EU, we left the EU. While the sun rose in the morning afterwards, things have changed. We in the Chamber who are EU citizens and wish to remain EU citizens have lesser rights today than we had on Friday afternoon. That is of huge concern, because rights are sometimes an abstract matter until you go looking for them and realise that they have disappeared or are being eroded or their removal, in their entirety, is being planned. That is when it becomes a serious matter.

Brexit was the backdrop to our most recent political crisis; it was the backdrop to the crisis that meant the Assembly collapsed and did not sit for three years. Some may point and say that, now that the EU withdrawal Bill has been ratified and article 50 has been enacted, Brexit has gone and, therefore, the crisis has gone. It has not. It is only starting; in fact, when we heard the dialogue over the weekend from successive British Ministers around how they planned to approach the trade negotiations, we could see the old sores of the past beginning to open up again. The last thing this Assembly, this Executive and this society need is the reopening of old sores.

The reality is that the trade negotiations will prove more difficult than was the case for bringing about the EU withdrawal Bill. While a road map has been set out, it is clear that the time frame that has been set in place will cause huge difficulties for people, businesses and the economy across this island and across all these islands. We welcome the Irish protocol in the withdrawal agreement, but we do not want to see businesses slowed down, stopped or held up as they cross the island of Ireland or cross between Belfast or Larne and England, Scotland or Wales. We want to see our people and businesses flourish. We want to see prosperity at the heart of the lives of all of our citizens. The huge threat that hangs over all of that is Brexit and EU withdrawal.

I appeal to all of the parties represented here, who have many different views —.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Stalford: In a previous discussion around the content of the EU withdrawal agreement, I made my views known. I wanted to see the referendum result implemented; I wanted to see the United Kingdom leave the European Union as one country. Therefore, I do not wish to see internal borders inside sovereign UK territory.

It is time to bring the country back together. Included in that, I mean this part of the country as well. The extended establishment rearguard action in the aftermath of the referendum sowed bitter, bitter division in the country. It was foolish to think that the expressed wishes of 17·4 million people could simply be eroded through political or legal chicanery. Whether we like it or not, more people voted to leave the European Union than have ever voted for any political party or prospect on a ballot paper in the history of the United Kingdom.

Since that referendum, the country has been through an extended culture war. It is important that that is brought to an end. I voted to leave the European Union. I do not believe myself to be superior morally or intellectually to those who voted Remain, but Remain voters are not superior morally or intellectually to those of us who voted Leave. Some of the characterisation that has been made of people who voted Leave borders on hatred.

We are all free citizens exercising our democratic rights in a free country. We should be big enough and mature enough to respectfully disagree.

12.15 pm

The Prime Minister has made some very specific pledges, not only publicly himself but in the content of the recent political agreement. It is important that those pledges are upheld; it is important that he holds to them. We all recall — at least I certainly do — two Prime Ministers, this one and his predecessor, stating that no British Prime Minister could accept internal borders inside the United Kingdom. Therefore, it is incumbent upon all of us, whether we voted Leave or Remain, to hold him to those pledges to protect business and trade in this part of the United Kingdom and to make a success of the future of our country.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you for allowing this matter to be discussed today. I also pay tribute to the Member for Upper Bann for raising it.

What happens in the next year, and in the years to come, is critical and fundamental to everyone in Northern Ireland — indeed, to everyone in Ireland and across these islands. As both Members who have spoken said, this is the first time that the Assembly has met and spoken since we left the European Union on Friday night. It is worth recording and giving witness to the fact that the majority of people in this part of the world did not vote to leave the European Union, and I say that with all due respect to my fellow Member for South Belfast who did vote to leave and, no doubt, holds his views with sincerity.

Northern Ireland voted to remain by 56%, to 44%. Through the withdrawal process and phase 1 of the talks, we have achieved a basic level of protection against a return to a hard border, at least for goods, on the island of Ireland. However, we have not seen much else. Those basic protections mean that we will not see a return to

hard infrastructure on the border. We will not see goods checked as they move between Dundalk and Newry, but we might see disruption on the Irish Sea. We do not know what kind of disruption that will be. We do not know what goods will be checked. We have pledges from the UK Prime Minister, as the previous Member who spoke said, but it is worth all of us pausing and questioning the value of pledges from the current Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister has been speaking, this morning, in London about what he sees as his redlines for the UK in the trade negotiations. He has been setting out more redlines. In a previous life, I was involved in a UK Government that set down unhelpful, strident and counterproductive redlines, which led to a response — a positive response from my perspective and that of people on my Benches — from the Irish Government and the EU that Irish citizens and EU citizens in Northern Ireland were not going to be abandoned and that protections would be sought by avoiding a hard border on this island. We now need solidarity from Dublin and Brussels. We also need British Ministers to pay attention to what this Assembly is saying about protecting our economy. We are a very long way from this deal being done. We have a huge amount of uncertainty, and now is the time for the various parties in this House to come together, where it is possible, and to find a common voice to get protection for all the people that we serve.

Dr Aiken: It is very clear that the United Kingdom has now left the European Union. Today, I have had the opportunity to listen to the Prime Minister's so-called vision for a trade deal. He is saying that there is no need for the UK to follow Brussels's rules, which creates more than a degree of uncertainty here in Northern Ireland, because, no matter what the rest of our country is doing, Northern Ireland will be following the majority of Brussels's rules as we go forward.

Indeed, today, we heard from one of the ferry companies, Stena Line, that it is looking at how it is going to manage potential customs borders and posts in the ports of Larne, Cairnryan, Birkenhead and other places. That should be a matter of considerable concern about where we are going to as well.

However, it is good to see, at long last, that the Northern Ireland Executive have set up a Brexit subcommittee after two weeks. It is one of the most fundamental issues we have and one of the most significant things we have to deal with. We have heard much of Norway, Switzerland, Australia and Canada-plus-plus-plus, but the Executive and the political parties, the wider community in Northern Ireland, the business community, agribusiness and academia, who actually understand the issues rather than just delivering rhetoric, must join together to get the best position for Northern Ireland. What I want to hear from now on is Northern Ireland-plus not Canada-minus or Australia-plus. We must do what is best for Northern Ireland.

I was a Remainer, but the reality is that the United Kingdom has left the European Union. We must get the best deal for all of us in Northern Ireland. We must have the best deal for every single citizen in Northern Ireland. To that end, we must work together, but there are only 11 months to go. There is a lot to do in a very short time. Now is the time for all political parties and everybody to gather together to make that happen.

Ms Armstrong: I opposed Brexit. I did not think that it would be good for Northern Ireland, and I remain convinced that that is the case. However, now we have to rebuild and fill those gaps. There are uncertainties, and today our Prime Minister made a speech that may bring further challenges for Northern Ireland and, indeed, costs to this place.

We need the softest Brexit possible. Checks down the Irish Sea seem to be inevitable. We need to consider how we are going to deal with those and how we can encourage the rest of the UK not to leave us at sea, peripheralised and left on our own. We have heard from several businesses about how they will be able to continue, including from hauliers who are trying to get products across either a sea or a border on the island. We need to think about what is happening. There are uncertain parameters today. We may be dictated to over our heads.

Boris Johnson appears to be diametrically opposed to what is happening in Northern Ireland and listening to Northern Ireland's needs. So, in this place, we must come together in damage limitation mode to ensure that Northern Ireland is protected, it is Northern Ireland first, and it is Northern Ireland that takes the lead in some of those discussions. Our voice has to be heard.

I am disappointed that we did leave. Friday night in my house was extremely quiet. It was a night of reflection and a night of what was lost, but all is not completely lost. We have come together in the Assembly and have a purpose. We all agreed that we did not agree with the withdrawal agreement, and now it is time to set out our stall to make sure that, for life here to continue, we protect our businesses and our citizens. Brexit may have happened to us, but we will not let it hinder us.

Ms Bailey: On Friday morning, I listened to the weather forecast. The weather reporter told us that it was going to be a dark, dank day, and that is exactly how I felt, as, I imagine, many across Northern Ireland — the majority of whom voted to remain — felt. We cannot sit back and say that this was the democratic will because we know that there is confusion and chaos right across the population in the UK.

While my colleague in South Belfast is absolutely right to say that 17·4 million voted to leave, that cannot be a stand-alone figure because we must acknowledge that over 16 million voted to remain, yet we have no clarity and no plan. In Northern Ireland, we are being held hostage to the fortune of a Prime Minister whom this House does not even trust, who led a campaign to leave that was full of nonsense and was found to have broken electoral law. He went further and was found to have acted illegally in proroguing Parliament to get his withdrawal Bill through. He has U-turned so many times on pledges and promises that we can expect the year ahead only to be full of more of the same.

When we put that together with the fact that elections for a new Government in the South will take place on Saturday — the polls show that no party will hold a majority and that the parties are likely to go into a process of trying to set up another coalition Government, which could string things out — we are really tight for time. If Boris Johnson and the UK Government are looking to have trade deals signed off within 11 months, they will need a magic wand. I have concerns for our future.

The workload for the Assembly and Executive will be huge. We have the opportunity to do something good and get something right. We know the emergencies that we need to address to look after the best interests of our people, particularly climate chaos and the changes required there, workers' rights and the right of people to free movement. There is a lot to do, and we are being lobbied hard. I hope that everybody can step up, speak with a collective voice and act in a collective effort in the best interests of all our citizens.

Mr Allister: There is something of a howling at the moon about Mr O'Dowd's contribution and, indeed, some others. The United Kingdom has left the EU. We are not going back. That is the reality. It is not a reality that is as fulsome and beneficial as I had wished it to be for Northern Ireland. The question that I voted on was whether I wanted the United Kingdom to leave or to remain; the question was not whether I wanted the United Kingdom to leave but to leave Northern Ireland behind in the EU, so, naturally, I am disappointed that, in some significant parts, that appears to be the outcome. To leave Northern Ireland marooned, colony-like, within the EU customs union to all intents and purposes and its single market for goods is to betray the principle that, having joined as one nation, we deserved to leave as one nation.

That came about as a consequence of many political shenanigans, most particularly by some who have had a lifelong ambition to break up the United Kingdom. It was greatly aided by the short-sightedness of the agri-food industry in this Province and some from business in this Province, who hyperventilated at the thought of some fettering of trade between North and South but gave no thought to the resulting fettering of our trade to our biggest market: GB. Having worked themselves into a frenzy about protecting the minnow part of our economy southwards and ignoring the gigantic part of our economy east-west, they in part contributed to the sad spectacle that Northern Ireland is to be left marooned under the EU customs code and its tariffs and the rules of the EU single market, which we cannot change, and subject, in all of that, to the governance of the European Court of Justice. That is not the outcome that any of us voted for, and that is not the outcome that was on the ballot paper.

Mr McAleer: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Allister: I do not think that that is possible.

Ms Dillon: On Friday, I visited a project in Pomeroy that had availed itself of £5 million of EU funding. That project is about reconciliation; it is about bringing the two parts of our community together. My concern is this: who will replace that funding? Given some of the comments from Members in the Chamber about us, in the wake of the New Decade, New Approach deal, going to the British Government with a begging bowl, do they think that we should not ask the British Government to replace that EU funding? I know the difference that EU funding has made in my constituency, and I am certain that there is not one Member who would not be able to say that it has made a massive difference in their constituency.

Where is the money coming from? I have not heard any talk about that. We are talking about business and the agri-food sector, which is extremely important. Frankly, the comments from the previous Member to speak were absolutely disgusting, particularly the manner in which he

referred to the whole sector. I held many meetings with that sector when the vote was first taken. The point that they made was that we could have no divergence from EU rules, because what really gives us an advantage here in the agri-food sector is the quality of our food. We will never be able to produce the quantity, but we have high-quality food. They made that very clear at that time, and your remarks are quite shameful.

12.30 pm

I would like to know what the approach of the House will be in relation to EU funding and what the approach will be to going to the British Government, not with a begging bowl but telling them what they owe us here. They owe us in terms of New Decade, New Approach as well. The nonsense of trying to cover for the British Government's attempt to remove themselves from their responsibilities should stop here and now. We, as a House, need to ensure that all of the funding remains in place. Our voluntary and community sector and our rural communities will be absolutely decimated. We have a responsibility to all of those people and sectors across our constituencies. I ask for the support of the House in ensuring that the funding that will be lost to this place through this Brexit will be replaced by the British Government.

Ms McLaughlin: Friday 31 January at 11:00 pm was a moment that the people of Derry and across the North never wanted to see. We were forced out of the European Union against our wishes. We deeply regret that decision, but the UK has now left the European Union. Today, the real work begins, and the battle over barriers will begin. It is clear from Prime Minister Johnson's conversations over the weekend and earlier this morning that he believes that some of the barriers are worth it if they free up the UK to make trade deals around the world. That causes a real problem here in the North.

The EU has made it clear that any member that leaves the club will not have unfettered access. The two dominant issues will be the level playing field and governance. Any divergence will cause a border in the Irish Sea. Over the next few months, I appeal to all Members and to the Executive to work together. We need to protect our economy in Northern Ireland. It is weak as it stands. We need to support the business community in these uncertain times and work collectively to protect the interests of all.

Mr McAleer: I had not intended to speak in the debate, but I want to draw attention to some of the remarks made by Mr Allister. People employed in the agri-food sector are right to be annoyed and anxious about what is happening. We have had huge support for our farmers and rural communities from the EU; in fact, last year, the single farm payment — this goes for many years — accounted for over 80% of farmers' income. The threat of that being lost is causing huge anxiety in that sector of our population. In addition, we hear from the British Prime Minister that they plan to diverge and go completely off on their own. We will have a situation in which the British Government will enter trade deals with other countries that have lesser animal welfare standards than we have. We run the risk of having our market here in the North — this is what farmers are afraid of — being flooded with inferior beef from other parts of the world.

It is really important that we protect our industry here. We have an all-island trade in the region of £1.2 billion in agri-food. I was at a conference last year where one dairy processor said that 55 of their lorries crossed the border every day to process dairy products. About 500,000 sheep are exported to the South and 500,000 pigs are imported into the North from the South every year, so there is huge all-island trade in agri-food. I do not blame people involved in the agri-food industry, which supports hundreds of thousands of jobs, families and communities, for being nervous at this time. Mr Allister and his remarks should not diminish that in any way at all.

Ms S Bradley: Like the previous Member, I was not intending to speak today, but I feel a duty to go on public record to support those who stepped forward at a time when there was absolutely no political lead in this place during a critical time in Brexit. I thank the representatives from industry who stepped forward and made it clear that all industry here had to be saved. We cannot politically pick over what suits and what does not, and we have a united duty to make sure that all industry is supported going forward.

Mr Buckley: Like some previous Members who spoke, I had not planned to speak on this Matter of the Day, but I think that it is important to do so because, from what I have listened to from some Members around the Chamber, you would forgive me for having the feeling that I am at a wake right now. Yes, indeed, Friday brought for me something of a bittersweet moment. It was sweet in the sense that it was the culmination of something that I personally had campaigned for and believed passionately in; bitter in the sense that the withdrawal agreement itself compromises the integrity of the Union that I cherish.

Collective decision-making will be required from the House and our political leaders to hold Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, firm to his commitment of free, unfettered access within the United Kingdom. That is something that we as a House should be united on. I welcome what has been said from across the Floor — we do not want borders, whether east-west or north-south — but we must be cognisant of the fact that Brexit has happened. The United Kingdom has left the European Union. It is now incumbent on us all to fight for the free, unfettered access that we rightly deserve.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Members. That concludes the debate on the Matter of the Day.

Assembly Business

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly, in accordance with paragraph 12(2) of schedule 1 to the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, nominates Paul McFadden for appointment as the acting Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs D Kelly: As Members are aware, the Public Services Ombudsman Act 2016 established and made provision about the office of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. The Assembly established the ombudsman's office to carry out the important and effective function of ensuring that there was a free, independent and impartial service for handling complaints about public services in Northern Ireland. The Assembly Commission believes that it is important to ensure that that service can be delivered. The 2016 Act provides that the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman is, by virtue of holding that office, the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Ombudsman and the Local Government Commissioner for Standards. The 2016 Act delegates responsibility for identifying a person to be nominated by the Assembly for the role of ombudsman to the Assembly Commission. The 2016 Act makes similar provisions for the nomination of a person to carry out the role of acting ombudsman in circumstances where the ombudsman is not in post. The previous ombudsman, Marie Anderson, was appointed as the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland on 16 July 2019. On her appointment as Police Ombudsman, Ms Anderson immediately ceased to be the Public Services Ombudsman. On behalf of the Commission, I take the opportunity to thank Ms Anderson on behalf of the Assembly for her distinguished and widely recognised work as ombudsman since April 2016.

In anticipation of Ms Anderson's departure and as the Assembly was not sitting, the Assembly Commission agreed that it would be preferable to nominate a person to carry out the role of acting ombudsman and await the resumption of the Assembly to appoint an ombudsman for the seven-year term set out in the 2016 Act. The Assembly Commission, therefore, wrote to the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in June 2019 to seek a legislative means at Westminster to allow for the appointment of an acting ombudsman. That would have ensured that the important oversight role that is carried out by the ombudsman did not lapse during the period when the Executive had not been formed and the Assembly was not sitting. Subsequently, the Assembly Commission likewise wrote to the current Secretary of State on the same basis. While that legislative solution was not put in place, the formation of the Executive on 11 January 2020 now means that the Assembly can once again undertake its nomination role as envisaged in the 2016 Act.

The benefit of nominating an acting ombudsman is that the important oversight functions of the ombudsman's office can be carried out by the acting ombudsman and, at the same time, the recruitment process for the ombudsman can progress. A situation such as this was envisaged by the 2016 Act. Members may wish to note that the nomination and subsequent appointment of an acting ombudsman can last only for the period up to 15 July 2020.

At its meeting on 5 September 2019, the Assembly Commission identified the current deputy ombudsman, Mr Paul McFadden, as a suitable person to carry out the role of acting ombudsman. Members should note that the deputy ombudsman is not the same thing as the acting ombudsman. The role of deputy ombudsman is not a statutory role, whereas the role of acting ombudsman carries with it the range of legislative functions that are ordinarily carried out by the ombudsman.

Paul McFadden has been the deputy ombudsman for Northern Ireland for three and a half years, since his appointment in July 2016. As the most senior official in the absence of the ombudsman, he holds full administrative delegation of the ombudsman's responsibilities and has been the acting accounting officer since July 2017. Paul joined the ombudsman's office from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, where he was a member of the senior management team for seven years. He established and headed up the Complaints Standards Authority, implementing a streamlined and improved complaints-handling framework across all of Scotland's public bodies. Paul previously helped to establish the independent Police Complaints Commissioner for Scotland in 2007, holding senior management responsibility for police complaints investigations.

The Assembly Commission is confident that Mr McFadden will be able to ensure that the important functions of the office of ombudsman can continue to be exercised effectively. He has agreed that, subject to nomination by the Assembly, he will fulfil the acting ombudsman's role until a successor ombudsman is appointed or —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: — until 15 July 2020, whatever comes sooner. I will give way.

Mr Allister: Will the Member clarify whether, once he is appointed acting ombudsman, he will continue as the deputy commissioner for local government standards? Is that possible?

Mrs D Kelly: May I come back to the Member on that point? The Commission hopes to meet at some time tomorrow or next week, and we will come back to the Member and the House on that point. Those are important functions that we need to ensure are followed through on. If his nomination is accepted today, we will see what ramifications it has for other staff in the ombudsman's office.

The ombudsman is appointed, as is any acting ombudsman, by Her Majesty The Queen on the nomination of the Assembly. Members, today, on behalf of the Assembly Commission, I seek the Assembly's nomination of Paul McFadden as the acting Public Services Ombudsman for a maximum period up to 15 July 2020. I ask the Assembly to agree his nomination.

Mr Speaker: No other Members have indicated a wish to speak, so I call John O'Dowd.

12.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: As Mrs Kelly said in her opening remarks, the Assembly Commission is determined to ensure that all the work of the ombudsman's office can continue until such time as a nomination can be made for the ombudsman. The nomination of the acting ombudsman means that the important oversight functions that can be carried out only with either an ombudsman or acting ombudsman in post will be in place from now until July.

In Mr McFadden, the Commission is confident that it has succeeded in nominating a candidate who will bring expertise and skill to the role. His nomination today is a positive sign that the Assembly is back in business and is carrying out its legislative functions. Subject to the Assembly's approval, the Assembly Commission wishes him well in his post.

In relation to Mr Allister's question to Mrs Kelly, it has been indicated by officials that, yes, he can continue in that role and carry out that function in conjunction with his current role.

In ending, I trust that Members from across the House will support the motion, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in accordance with paragraph 12(2) of schedule 1 to the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, nominates Paul McFadden for appointment as the acting Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

Ms Armstrong: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Go ahead.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Mr Speaker. This morning, while we have been in the Chamber, the Minister for Communities made a statement to the press about welfare mitigations. We were all told that the ministerial statement should have been available by 11.30 am. I have checked again and, as of this time, it is not available. I believe that the Minister has not followed Standing Order 18, under which there should have been an oral statement to the House. I do not believe that a Minister should announce it to the press before announcing it to Members.

Mr Speaker: The Member has made the point, and we will deal with that later.

Private Members' Business

Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: First Stage

Mr Allister: I beg to introduce the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 01/17-22], which is a Bill to amend sections 7 and 8 of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 and article 3 of the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in relation to special advisers in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, repeal the Civil Service Commissioners (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016, amend section 17 of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and to make additional provision for the functioning of government in Northern Ireland and connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: Members can take their ease for a minute or two while we change the Table.

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

Autism Training in Schools

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Pam Cameron to move the motion.

Mrs Cameron: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the specific needs of pupils with autism in our schools; values and supports the role of all educators in ensuring pupils with autism have the best educational outcomes; and calls on the Minister of Education to explore the introduction of mandatory autism training for all teachers and classroom assistants.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. As two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes has been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposers of the amendments will have 10 minutes to move their amendments and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mrs Cameron: Let me say at the outset how pleased I am that this is the first private Members' motion brought to the Floor since our return to the Chamber, and what better message to send out to our constituents than one that shows that we prioritise those in need, we champion better outcomes for all, and we support our educators in bringing through future generations.

Even while the Assembly was down, the work of the all-party group (APG), of which I am proud to be chair, continued. As many of you already know, the all-party group on autism was set up in 2008 to look specifically at issues relating to the autism community in Northern Ireland. The aim of the all-party group is ultimately to ensure that adequate support and services are available to the 30,000 families affected by autism and that the main issues are highlighted. The APG has witnessed the introduction of the Autism Act in 2011 and the resulting autism strategy. Autism NI's secretariat has led the lobbying for that, for which we thank them. Since the strategy was introduced, however, the APG on autism has also seen the many failures of the strategy. Those are outlined in the 'Broken promises' report of 2016, which I encourage you all to read.

The Autism Act is still the most comprehensive piece of single disability legislation in Europe, but it has failed to accomplish what we, as an APG, hoped that it would. We feel particularly let down by the resulting autism strategy and the accompanying action plans. Only one of the three action plans has been completed, although all three have a deadline of 2020. That stagnation in delivery is the legacy of three years without this place. Therefore, the onus is on us to correct it with swift and decisive action to make up for lost time.

The reality is stark. Childhood diagnosis of autism has nearly doubled in the past six years. Therefore, the lack of support and services has become more and more evident. For example, as outlined in the autism strategy, diagnosis is supposed to be made within eight weeks. However, we know that that is not happening in most areas, with many

families waiting up to 18 months. We all know that early intervention is key to managing autism, but intervention is being delayed owing to lengthy diagnosis processes. Early intervention services are also inadequate. They vary from trust to trust and, at present, do not support the complex needs of our families and children.

Education, however, is by far the issue raised most by parents and teaching unions, and, as we know, in the many related cases in our constituencies. The school environment is ultimately where autistic children spend the vast majority of their day. The all-party group has met the Ulster Teachers' Union on various occasions over the past two years. It has told us unreservedly that it cannot access adequate autism training provision through the Department of Education. In fact, the current president, Susan Thompson, reported recently:

"There are not enough courses. The timings of courses are inaccessible, and the fact that they are not mandatory is worrying."

Teachers and classroom assistants feel overwhelmed and are under-resourced to be able to work with children with autism, as they have not had the opportunity to gain the skills needed to do so. Therefore, the Ulster Teachers' Union, the National Association of Teachers and the National Education Union have said, unequivocally, that they are in full support of the immediate introduction of mandatory autism training in Northern Ireland.

Autism NI has the only autism-specific helpline in Northern Ireland and receives over 5,000 calls each year from autistic individuals, parents and professionals. Education is the subject of the vast majority of the calls. In 2019, the charity also conducted a survey relating specifically to education. From the survey, it was discovered that over one third of children with autism were on a reduced timetable. That can mean reduced for just an hour a day, or it can mean that they are in class for only an hour a day, which is totally unacceptable. It is even more unacceptable when one takes into account that 78% of autistic children are in mainstream classrooms. Currently, one in 30 school-age children is diagnosed with autism. That could be one child in every classroom. It should be seen as common sense that the person that children with autism are spending a large quantity of their day with understands them and is able to educate and support them in a way that fulfils their needs. For parents already anxious about the challenges that their child faces each and every day, the reassurance of having teachers fully trained as a result of mandatory training would provide additional comfort that their child will be supported in the best way possible.

I urge the Minister to act. The public support is widespread. In September 2019, an online petition created by the charity Autism NI that called for mandatory autism training was signed by more than 10,000 people in just a few days. An accompanying rally was held at Stormont. It was attended by hundreds and received good media coverage. We have a draft Programme for Government that states clearly that every child deserves the "best start in life". The best start in life for any child includes the best educational outcomes, but, for children with autism, we know that that is not the case. The autism strategy also states that all teaching staff should understand autism. Again, we know that this target has not been met. These

are our children's lives that we are playing with, and their future.

Every autistic child becomes an autistic adult. We need to spend now to save later or risk many of our autistic adults ending up in mental health services, which we know are already under pressure. The UK's largest autism research charity, Autistica, recently reported that autistic adults are nine times more likely to die through suicide than the rest of the general population. I am sure you will agree that this statistic is horrific and unacceptable. Autism training makes good economic sense. With the right support and opportunities, we know that autistic young children can achieve and go on to live a fulfilling and productive life. Not only is it our moral duty to reverse the fate of a generation of children and young people with autism, but it makes good social and economic sense.

The UK statistic for autistic adults in employment is 16% for full-time work. This figure has remained the same for the past decade, showing that autistic people are not benefiting, and reaffirming that we must turn the curve earlier at every step of their journey towards adulthood and work. The NI Executive have a responsibility to make sure that autistic children can get the support that they need at the earliest opportunity — and we know that is from education — from people who understand autism. Autistic children deserve the same opportunities in life as their peers. We should all want to create a more inclusive environment for all our children, and autistic children and adults need to be part of that. Other parts of the UK have already implemented mandatory autism training for teachers, and Northern Ireland needs to follow suit or risk being left behind.

We are not asking for autism to be elevated above other disabilities or needs. We are simply asking for our children to have an equal playing field that can be afforded to the most basic right of a good education. A friend recently shared a post on Facebook that said the following, and I am quoting again:

"Allowing a student with a hidden disability to struggle academically or socially when all that is needed for success are appropriate accommodations and explicit instruction is no different than failing to provide a ramp for a person in a wheelchair."

And how true is that? Would any child with any other disability be asked to attend a school that is not equipped, resourced or trained to support their needs? No, they would not.

It is important that this debate focuses on what the motion asks for: mandatory autism training. What is does not include is the nature of that training, and that is for the Department to consult on. What is important today, however, is that we get the commitment to introduce mandatory training, the form of which is for another day and would serve only to confuse the debate at this stage. I am asking the Minister of Education to introduce mandatory autism training for all teaching staff, to include those in training and those already in post, and classroom assistants in Northern Ireland. I also respectfully ask that any exploration period required be kept to an absolute minimum, because our children have waited long enough.

Miss Woods: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "Education" and insert:

"to introduce mandatory autism training for all trainee teachers, teachers and classroom assistants."

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Miss Woods: Autism, as we know, is a lifelong disability that affects the social and communication centre of the brain. It affects the way an individual relates to people, situations and their immediate environment. Many individuals with autism have difficulty processing everyday sensory information like sight, smells, touch, tastes and sounds. This varies from person to person.

Many Members will know someone with autism. The number of children identified with autism in Northern Ireland has increased year on year since 2012. According to Department of Health figures published in 2019, one in 30 school-age children has autism and 78% of autistic children are in mainstream schools. That is, potentially, one in every classroom. Given this, and the inherent tendency in Northern Ireland of reactionary training for teachers, we should be pursuing a more proactive approach. Compulsory or mandatory training on autism would be a solid foundation to build upon.

1.00 pm

In 2012, the National Autistic Society for Northern Ireland carried out a survey of children with autism and their parents. Of the young people they spoke to, almost a third said that one of the worst things about school was that their teachers did not understand them. School is daunting enough for any child, as we all know, let alone one who feels that they are not understood. That puts undue pressure and stress on the student themselves, the teacher-student relationship, the wider interaction in the classroom with others and on the relationship between the teacher and the family. More widely, it adds to mental health pressures.

After speaking to a good friend of mine in Bangor called Aaron about his experiences in school and with tech, he told me that he would like to see the mental health of children and young people with autism talked about, as they are often forgotten —.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. On the point of mental health, does she agree with me that one of the sad realities of a lack of autism training in schools is that many parents are overwhelmed when dealing with the spill-out at home, and that has had an adverse impact on their mental health?

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his question. I completely agree. Parents have enough pressure on them, let alone dealing with a situation where, say, the teachers are not involved or do not understand what is going on at home.

Aaron stated that, if teachers were more aware of how to deal with pupils with autism and had mandatory training in their issues, their mental health would be better understood. The research conducted in 2012 also showed that expertise in schools remained patchy and that many teachers did not get the training, knowledge or resources that they needed to help children with autism. Almost one in five parents indicated dissatisfaction with teachers' understanding of how to support children. More recently,

Autism NI stated that one third of parents coming to them for advice on their children's education said that they were on a reduced timetable at their current school. I agree with the chief executive at Autism NI that that is entirely unacceptable. Autism is categorised as a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and under the Autism Act (NI) 2011, where reasonable adjustments must be made in all public organisations, but we know that that is not happening in many of our schools. All our children should be given the best possible start in life, and a child with autism should not be disadvantaged when it comes to their education.

How can children with autism not be disadvantaged in their education if we continue with the current opt-in training culture? Adequate mandatory training for teachers would mean that the special education needs of all children and young people, including those with autism, were met and would be an important first step to help transform the lives and prospects of future generations of children with autism. The reason why mandatory training is so important and why we have tabled the amendment is to make sure that teachers and classroom assistants work towards a whole-school approach in supporting children. It is of note that, in September 2019, the Government announced that all health and social care staff in England would receive training in autism and learning disability, working towards a whole-healthcare approach. I would like to congratulate those who campaigned on the issue — specifically Mencap and their Treat Me Well campaign — and the all-party groups that have been formed. I hope that this can be fully realised in Northern Ireland too. Could this not be rolled out to our educators to better people's experiences in a school setting as well?

Research conducted by Ulster University in the greater Belfast area in 2003 found that a majority of staff felt they had inadequate training to equip them to meet children's particular needs and reported a lack of knowledge and skills to help those children. Teachers and classroom assistants are fully supportive of the motion. All of the teachers' unions in Northern Ireland support the introduction of mandatory autism training. I note that, in the autism strategy 2013-2020 and action plan 2013-16, support funding for autism-related training for those in the preschool sector is listed, as well as the publication of guides for teachers in classrooms and some school and parent resources. However, training should not be limited to those in the preschool sector; it should be extended to all those training to be teachers or classroom assistants and all those currently qualified. The initial teacher training programme in the rest of the UK covers a wider variety of the skills that teachers need to teach the curriculum, and, in 2016, the UK Government added a teacher training framework which ensures that SEN is covered, including how to support children with autism.

We have had time to find ways in which we can improve provision of support for those in our schools who have autism, so the time for exploring options is over. What we need now is concrete action for teachers and students. That is not to say that we do not have any resources in Northern Ireland: we do. The Department invests substantial resources in the training provision at Middletown autism centre, but, while that is to be commended, it is not sufficient and does not meet the growing demand, nor is it compulsory. Providing support to schools, including the continuing professional development of staff, has already

been identified in previous strategies and action plans. The Assembly should push on with this by compelling the Minister of Education to include autism training as part of core teacher training. Assembly questions to the Minister have shown that it is not possible to know how many teachers have received the current training, but, with mandatory training, we know that we can and will ensure that everyone has received the same level of training.

In September last year, a petition was signed by over 10,000 people online asking the Department of Education to introduce mandatory training. A rally attended by people with autism, parents and teachers was held here on 11 September 2019, making their voices heard. We have much to do here to strengthen the Autism Act and ensure its proper implementation. We should listen to those 10,000 people today, and that is why we call on the Minister to introduce mandatory autism training as an important step in delivering for our young people and supporting our teaching staff.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Karen Mullan to move amendment No 2.

Ms Mullan: I speak in support the motion and in favour —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member must move the amendment first and then resume her seat.

Ms Mullan: I beg to move amendment No 2:

At end insert:

“, and for teacher training colleges to introduce a compulsory module that includes this training during the postgraduate certificate in education.”

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other contributors will have five minutes. The Assembly should note that amendment No 1 and amendment No 2 are mutually exclusive, so, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question shall not be put on amendment No 2.

Ms Mullan: I speak in favour of the motion and amendment No 1. I believe that our amendment strengthens the motion but also that we should show a united front today.

As my party's education spokesperson and a member of the all-party group on autism, I have heard from many in the education sector, parents, young people and the wider community who are calling for greater autism awareness and training. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises the right to inclusive education for all persons with disabilities. If we are to go about realising that, making autism-specific training mandatory for our teachers is a step in the right direction.

In the North, one in 30 children has a diagnosis of autism. The vast majority of those children are educated in a mainstream setting, which shows the need for autism training for teachers and classroom assistants. In my city of Derry, Derry City and Strabane District Council and our two main shopping centres have led the way in making our public venues inclusive for all. Part of that has been training all front-line staff in autism awareness. If we can do that in our public and private sectors, why are we not providing that training to our teaching staff, who have our children in their care anywhere up to 30 hours a week?

Our teaching staff want to be supported to provide the best care and education to our young people and to be more equipped to do so. The role of the teacher is evolving; they are, increasingly, working with children with complex needs, and introducing this training at the start of their journey will, no doubt, serve them well throughout their career. For that reason, our amendment would strengthen the motion to include a compulsory module during teacher training. Introducing that in teacher training colleges is a pragmatic step that could be taken and would have an impact for a relatively low cost.

In October last year, I met the Department and asked them to look at options, including costs. One such option to be explored is assigning one of the allocated teacher training days, which would reduce the cost of teacher cover. Widening out the training to include compulsory disability training should also be included.

Today's motion and debate is the start of what is required, but we now need action. Parents and young people and our teaching staff need action from all of us. The Autism Act was brought in in 2011, and yet we continue to see an increased number of children and young people in particular waiting years for diagnosis and support services. I call on the Minister to acknowledge that there is a crisis in special education needs provision and that many teachers actively seek this training. By supporting the motion and amendment No 1, we would send a positive message to the sector as well as to families.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We now move on to the list. Before I call the next Member to speak, I remind Members that contributions are limited to five minutes, although, if you take an intervention, you will get an additional minute.

Mr McGrath: I am pleased to speak in support of the motion and the amendments. We do not really see a major difference between the amendments, so we are happy to support them as we go along.

As Members will know, the SDLP has campaigned for many years — from 2002, with the work of John Fee MLA — for increased autism support. That culminated in the Autism Act (NI), which Dominic Bradley brought forward in 2010 and which began to operate in 2011. Sadly, the potential of that Act to transform people's lives has been compromised not only by a lack of financial support but by a lack of ministerial decision-making over the past three years. With that in mind, I warmly welcome the fact that, today, we are in the Chamber discussing the issue.

The need for this type of training is long overdue. The huge increase in ASD-related diagnoses in recent years should serve as a wake-up call about the urgent need for such provision. We in the House and, indeed, the Minister must listen to the will of people here. Diagnoses have trebled in a decade. Schools and autism services struggle to meet an ever-increasing demand. From speaking to teachers and parents in my constituency of South Down, I know that there is a clear want and need for mandatory autism training in our schools.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Member giving way. I stand as your South Down colleague who has heard that message resonating. Does the Member agree that, although that critical training is the first and right step, it must be properly resourced — I take the point about not getting into the detail today — and real cognisance needs

to be taken of the conflicting time pressures on the teacher in the classroom? I say that as somebody who has come through teacher training. The pressures in the classroom can put a very different slant on it. I urge, going forward, that we recognise that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McGrath: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Yes, certainly, and we see that resources are required when we look at the scale and the numbers of young people affected. Some of the statistics that I will mention later will certainly highlight how some form of resource will need to go alongside it.

One eighth of the annual education budget, which is, I think, about £270 million, is being spent on supporting children with special education needs, including autism, but we can do more. The Department of Health tells us that one in 30 school-age children lives with ASD, and 78% of those children are in mainstream schools. That is a huge number of young people across the North in all types of schools who have to deal with the issue.

According to the Children's Law Centre, the number of parents experiencing difficulties in receiving support for their children has increased. There are teachers and classroom assistants who, through no fault of their own, do not understand the complexities of autism. That has led to children who need targeted support being at times given detention, excluded from class or, ultimately, expelled from school. We cannot allow that to continue. The Children's Law Centre also said that, five years ago, it dealt with 400 cases relating to special education in schools compared with 1,600 cases now, so there is a very obvious need that we need to address.

The vast majority of staff, teachers, classroom assistants and support staff who work in our schools are among the most caring and considerate individuals in the North. Like many other roles such as nursing, they do that with a sense of passion beyond their sense of duty. Teachers and classroom assistants whom my colleagues and I have listened to fully support the motion today. All the teacher unions, as was mentioned, also support it, but we have to make sure that this is not simply a box-ticking exercise.

There is concern among some that that is what this could become if it is just a quick half-day exercise. We need to make sure that any training is done properly.

1.15 pm

At the same time, however, we need to do something. I always remember the story about what can happen when the bell rings at the end of class. There might be so much noise in the classroom that, if a homework were to be issued at that stage, children with autism might not be able to process the instruction that they were given, and that could lead to them going home and potentially having a meltdown. That can cause a lot of stress in the home. If teachers are equipped with very small tips such as that, it could help massively in the classroom, especially for the 78% in mainstream education. A half-day exercise might be very quick, but it could equip our teachers and classroom assistants with some really helpful insights into how to help children.

It has been said that living with autism is simply a different way of experiencing the world. A person living with autism may see, hear, feel, taste and touch the full vibrancy of the world around them, and that is witnessed most keenly in the classroom. Although it is a different way of experiencing the world, it can also be overwhelming. We must be sensitive to the needs of those living with autism and ensure that we have done all that we can to facilitate a sensitive, understanding and informed learning environment. I urge each of you to support the motion.

Mr Butler: I support the motion and the amendment. As a member of the APG on autism perhaps this past four years, I have become increasingly aware of the disadvantage faced by our young people with autism. We know that, in Northern Ireland, we face higher levels of autism than the national average. In fact, the Department of Health figures from 2019 state that we now have one in 30 school-age children with autism. When we look at the average classroom size, we see that that means that just about every classroom in Northern Ireland will have at least one child who may require adjustment or support.

The timeline for action stretches back more than 10 years. In 2009, Minister McGimpsey published the ASD strategic action plan and later commissioned the Regional Autistic Spectrum Disorder Network (RASDN) to implement the strategy. That should have provided the momentum required to get us further than where we are today. Further ministerial announcements followed, and progress has been made, but much momentum has been lost and a proper, collegiate, cross-departmental strategy has perhaps been lacking.

My constituency office, as I am sure that of other Members, handles a multiplicity of issues, and children with autism and other spectrum issues figure high on the list. When, as an elected representative, I seek to help, I share the frustrations of parents and carers at the speed of response and, at times, the utter exasperation of teachers who are clearly seeking to do the best that they can do for their pupils.

I am delighted that the Ulster Teachers' Union is supportive of the introduction of mandatory training. From conversation with teacher friends, I have been convinced that that is the only way forward. The pressures faced by teachers are many, but surely an element of awareness-raising training for the profession in a mandated form, accessed at initial training and revisited through refresher events, can only help alleviate the growing pressures.

The majority of our children with autism are taught in mainstream education. To be accurate, it is 78%. Therefore, to try to dilute who is trained and where they are trained would be to ignore the struggle of our children in the education system across all our communities.

Every child deserves the "best start in life", as stated in our Programme for Government. That being the collective aim of the Executive means that we need to take a collegiate approach in order to ensure that our children are not disadvantaged in any way. Therefore, if we are serious about achieving that aim, we must ensure that all teaching and assistant staff are equipped and informed to help them fulfil their role. To do less would be to lower the bar to such an extent that we may fail before we even begin.

As mentioned by Members, it was incredible to be part of the elected group that was in attendance when

a petition of over 10,000 signatures was delivered to Stormont in September 2019. The rally was attended by parents, teachers, activists and, most importantly, autistic individuals. It was a testament to the public body of support for this motion and the wish that it becomes a reality.

I will finish on this very important point, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The future of the individual children with autism hinges on the support they get in their early and formative years. This is a partnership between parents, society, teachers and other agencies. However, when we reflect on the outcomes in their future life, and the barriers to work and further education they face, we must effect change, and we must do it now. I support the motion and the amendment.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion and amendment No 1.

I have been the Alliance Party health spokesperson since 2016, and since then barely a day has passed that the subject of autism, and the needs of the children living with it, has not been raised with me, so this is good news. Certainly, there is a higher level of public consciousness of this condition and the steps that need to be taken forward.

Last November, in my own constituency, I attended the opening of the National Autistic Society centre in Carryduff. I know there are MLAs in the Chamber today who were also there. It is the first centre of its kind in Northern Ireland, designed specifically with the needs of people living with autism in mind. The advantage of having this centre, which is a step forward, is not only that it provides space for people with the condition and their carers, but it also plays a role in enhancing the awareness raising process to ensure that people with autism are better catered for in daily life, not least when they are accessing public services.

In fact, we are approaching a decade since the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which requires reasonable adjustments to be made by public organisations. Unfortunately, this has not happened across the school estate due to the various difficulties in managing the process efficiently. However, it is worth emphasising that the Act, and other legislation, clearly requires equal treatment for children with autism in the education system. As my colleague has just pointed out, the last Programme for Government also gave a specific commitment to giving every child the "best start in life". The motion correctly reflects the fact that we need to achieve the outcome envisaged in the legislation by making sure that everyone is aware of it and suitably trained. We are keen to strengthen it a little to emphasise that this is something that must be done, rather than just explored. I do support Mrs Cameron's recommendation that this should be consulted on, because it is both our legal and moral duty to do so.

Furthermore, teachers have no issue with this, and, as we have heard today, the teaching unions are very much in favour of mandatory autism training. We are also keen to emphasise that this needs to include trainee teachers, because it needs to be there from the start of their education journey. New teachers entering the profession will have the advantage of growing up in a society which is already more aware of autism than ever before. They will no doubt be the first to say that specific training will be very useful. Of course, the reason that all teachers need to be trained is that they will all come across autism. On

average, almost every class will contain one child living with autism, and the vast majority of children with autism are within our mainstream education provision.

The most compelling reason for supporting the motion is not connected to teaching or legal obligations, but it is the simple reality that so many people living with autism do not end up in full-time employment. This must be, at least in part, to do with inadequate support from the start of their education, as well as the ongoing lack of awareness of the condition, despite recent advances. By enabling people with autism to have more choice and control at the outset, including of education pathways and healthier lifestyles, we can set them on the road to a more independent life, with the same opportunities in learning and employment as everyone else.

No one here today is arguing that this first step will solve all the problems around autism. We need to investigate better mental health provision, better workplace support and ongoing better public awareness of not just autism but the effects it has on pupils' lives. However, this is one step that will be hugely significant, not just because it has an impact on early life, but because it will send a very clear message from this Assembly that we want people living with autism to have exactly the same chances as everyone else. I commend this motion and amendment No 1.

Ms P Bradley: I welcome the opportunity today to speak on this very important issue. I thank my colleague Pam Cameron for bringing the motion to the House. I also thank the Members who tabled amendments. Those go some way to strengthening the motion, so they are very welcome. I will support the motion whatever happens.

I, too, have been an active member of the all-party group on autism over the past number of years. In the three years when we had no Assembly, the all-party group on autism was extremely active in calling all the Departments to account and writing to them and asking just what they were doing to support not only children but adults living with autism. It became apparent very early on that Departments were falling short of what they were required to do under the Autism Act and strategy.

We, as MLAs, cannot just blame those Departments for falling short; we have to take some of that blame, especially over the past three years when we have not been here to call those Departments to account. I am so glad that we are back here, doing the job that we need to do. This is our first motion, and we make a commitment here today not to take our foot off the pedal but to call all Departments to account.

Going back to the motion and mandatory training for teachers, Mrs Cameron mentioned in her speech, as did others, that, when the National Union of Teachers gave evidence to the all-party group, it became very evident that we were failing our children and our schools, and they were crying out for help. In some primary schools across Northern Ireland, perhaps only one teacher has had autism training. Therefore, it is incumbent on the Minister to bring about that change in order that we deliver for vulnerable children who need our help.

When we got the information packs and the research packs, it was interesting to look back at the number of Assembly questions that have been asked over the last 10 years on mandatory autism training. There have been many, and the same answer keeps coming back. One of

the points in that answer is Middletown. I have been there, along with some of my all-party colleagues. Pam and I had a bit of a road trip that day because I was directing and I got us lost, but we found it eventually, and it is a fantastic place. It does wonderful work, but it is not the answer. The answer is wider than that. The answer is to invest in all our teachers so that they get the help and support that they need.

I also praise the voluntary and community sector and the work that it does in meeting that unmet need. I also praise all those parent-led groups in our communities. We all have them, and we have all visited them, in our constituencies. Parents are supporting one another to try to navigate through the education system and the health system, and, sometimes, that is the only help that they have.

Other colleagues will know that special educational need comes up in our constituency offices time and time again. I have had many meetings over the years about children, specifically around autism, who are not receiving the proper attention that they need. So, this is something that we need to add on to the mandatory autism training. The other Mrs Bradley mentioned in her intervention that, if we have this and mandatory training, once a child is diagnosed, those services need to follow the child. There is no point in having a diagnosis only to find out that the services are not available. I recently visited some schools in my area, and there is a recurring theme, which is special educational needs services. It is all well and good having a diagnosis, but unless we have support for those children and their families, we will not have done what we set out to do.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Ms P Bradley: Yes.

Mr Butler: Thank you. I love your passion for the subject. We know that mental health issues exist across the suite of primary education and with our young people, but there is an even greater propensity for mental health issues among young people with autism. Do you agree that perhaps there is a double win here if we can support our young people in their journey with autism and the, at times, hidden mental health issue that also exists that sometimes is not recognised?

1.30 pm

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I was going to say to the Member, "Thank you for that extra minute", but he nearly spoke the whole way through it. *[Laughter.]* I absolutely agree with the Member, and it is something that the chair of the all-party group brought up as well: in mental health, early intervention is key, especially for children who have additional needs. Early intervention can save money in the long term. Of course, we are not all about saving money; we are about saving lives too and improving quality of life, so that was a good point.

I have little time left, but I want to say that one of the schools in my area is Cedar Lodge, which is for children with additional needs, especially autism. We need to do more to support those special educational schools; it does not just stop at the door of our mainstream schools.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I have been a member of the APG since 2008. I will stick to the mandatory training, but I am delighted that the Minister is here, because I hope that, after this debate, he will take the lead on all of this. A lot of us know that a strategy and a plan arose from the 2011 Act, identifying the responsibilities of each Department. The previous Member mentioned this: we hope that the Minister will take the lead on this and show the other Departments the way, because, for a number of years, we have been trying to get the right services for people with ASD.

I thank Autism NI and the National Autistic Society, plus all the people who have helped for a number of years with the administration of the work of the APG. A lot of good work has been done. For years, they have helped us to compose questions. Some days, we get the right answers, but, more often than not, we do not make enough progress. Listening to the comments of many of the contributors to this debate, I think that we are going in the right direction. There are two reports that I want to mention on record, because it is important to do so for the people who have helped us a lot to bring us to where we are. Hopefully, as I said, after this, the Minister will take on board the comments of the group and we can move forward with the chair and all the people associated with the group and work with the Departments.

The issue of mandatory training goes back to a report that was launched in the Long Gallery in 2012 entitled, 'A* for Autism: Make every school a good school'. That report highlighted the difficulties that children with autism experienced in the education system here. Education, as we know, is a fundamental part of every child's life. It gives children the opportunity to learn about the world they live in and how they can play a part in this world. It should be a time when children feel safe and happy and confident about building relationships and friendships and being able to make the most of their abilities and talents. It should help them to develop independence and prepare them for a bright and happy future.

In the research for the report, parents told us that they wanted an education system that is ambitious and believes their children can achieve; gives their children similar opportunities to other children; understands and supports their children's needs; allows their children to develop friendships and life skills; allows their children to enjoy good mental health; and prepares their children for life. Those are what any parent would want for a child with or without autism, but, unfortunately, collectively we have left them down.

In 2016, the National Autistic Society NI, in conjunction with Autism NI, published 'Broken Promises', a report that highlighted the failures in the delivery of the autism strategy going back to 2011 and the difficulties that children and young people experienced in the education system. A call was made for mandatory autism training for teachers and classroom assistants. Given that every teacher — this is no slight on teachers; I do not want them emailing me about this — will teach multiple autistic children during their career, that puts those children at risk of being taught by teachers who have not chosen to educate themselves in their own time. If mandatory training were introduced, its quality would be fundamental. It is not enough to simply raise awareness of autism; teachers must also understand autism and be schooled

in the techniques and strategies needed to teach a child with autism and all its associated complexities. Mandatory training would be a first step towards addressing and meeting the needs of pupils with autism.

We will not divide on the motion. Everybody has spoken very well. I support the motion and amendment. I reiterate that I hope that the Minister will take the lead on this and ask for support across the Departments that have a role and responsibility across the autism spectrum.

Mr Middleton: I thank my colleagues for tabling this important motion. The fact that it has been tabled at such an early opportunity sends a signal as to how important the issue is not only to us but to wider society. I thank the Minister for being in the Chamber today. We hope that he will take on board the valid points that have been made by all contributors so far. I also pay tribute to Autism NI, the National Autistic Society and all the fantastic organisations that, over the past number of years, particularly the past three years, have kept their shoulders to the wheel. The fact that the all-party group on autism has continued to meet has been mentioned. That is valuable and important work, and, hopefully, that will pay dividends in what we will see over the coming weeks. Like my colleague, I recognise the Circle of Support organisation in my constituency and the many parent-led organisations that do fantastic voluntary work. The support that they provide is very important.

There is no doubt that there is widespread support for the motion. We know that, just last September, a rally was held here at Stormont. We know that there was an online petition with over 10,000 signatories. It is a hugely emotive issue. We, as elected Members, and the Minister need to ensure that it is delivered on, and I hope that that will happen over the next number of weeks and months. As colleagues mentioned, teachers and classroom assistants have indicated their support for the motion. All the teachers' unions in Northern Ireland support the introduction of mandatory autism training.

Many of us in the Chamber, including me, have family members with autism. We know about not only the challenges but the opportunities that that brings, whether that be at the initial assessment stage, through education or as they move into the workplace. As my colleagues said, we know of the delays around assessment, but, when that assessment comes, it is vital that the services follow, right through education and into the workplace.

According to recent Department of Health figures, one in 30 school-age children has autism in Northern Ireland. Of those, 78% are in mainstream schools, not special schools. Given those figures, it is vital that the teaching force in Northern Ireland receive current, relevant and up-to-date training to assist them in delivering a curriculum that allows every child to reach their full potential. It is vital that no child is left behind. Only 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment in the UK, even though 78% do not have a learning disability. Many of those say that that is an adverse effect of a lack of support during the school years and of not receiving a full education, with mental health deteriorating as a result. That gap needs to be filled. Over the past couple of years, I have met individuals with autism who now work in the public sector, some in very exciting roles. We need to ensure that we can encourage people with autism to get into workplaces and ensure that people are mindful and understanding of their requirements and

needs. In closing, I urge Members to get behind the motion and, indeed, the amendments, whichever way they fall.

Mr Durkan: The introduction of mandatory autism training for all teaching staff was the subject of a petition that many Members have mentioned already today. It was organised by Autism NI last year. We saw the obvious, in my opinion, need for such training and supported the petition. I am sure that other Members did, and I was one of over 10,000 people who signed it. I take the opportunity, as Gary did, to commend Autism NI for the work that it has done, continuously and consistently campaigning to improve services and support for those living with autism.

I must say, however, that I was dumbfounded at the response from the Department of Education to the petition. It was deemed that the proposal to increase provision in schools in line with a significant rise in autism diagnoses was premature. On the contrary, the need for that type of training is long overdue. The exponential rise in autism- and ASD-related diagnoses in recent years is testament to the urgent need for provision. From speaking with teachers and parents, as others have done, in and beyond constituency, I know that there is a clear demand and desire for mandatory autism training. The Minister must listen, where his Department would not, to the public and to the evidence. As Colin McGrath told us, diagnoses have trebled in the past decade, and autism services struggle to meet the ever-increasing demand. Indeed, I contend that it was the Department's response that was premature. It was made without giving due consideration to the inarguable statistics relating to the severe lack of adequate autism services in education.

When it comes to autism, it seems that we need to foster a change of attitudes not among the general public but among the powers that be. The issue needs to be progressed, and I welcome the motion as a means of doing so. When it comes to education, no child should be left behind. We must create an education system that provides fair and equal access for all. Members who spoke previously have lamented the failure so far to deliver on the promises and potential of our Autism Act, but we cannot blame that just on the fact that we have not been here in three years. Long before that, pressure on autism services and a lack of autism support was becoming unbearable, and the cracks that were showing are now growing.

In my constituency, there was uproar and outrage last year when I uncovered the fact that the Western Health and Social Care Trust was unable to use its allocation of funding for the autism pathway project and that money was sent back, despite the fact that we had in that trust area over 800 people waiting on a list for assessment. That befuddled many, particularly those working hard in the community to support individuals and families with autism, and we are lucky to have several of those organisations in Derry. Gary Middleton mentioned Circle of Support, and Parents of Older Children with Autism (POCA) and the Jigsaw Project are another couple that do sterling work. I was glad last week to have it confirmed to me by the Western Trust that significant steps had been taken and were being taken to address its huge shortcomings in that area.

There is a danger that, because the demand for diagnosis has become so huge, meeting the demand for diagnosis becomes our sole focus or our Holy Grail. Paula Bradley said that many families discover, to their disappointment and confusion, that, once they have won their battle or,

in many cases, war for diagnosis, they are left in limbo. There are inconsistencies across trust areas. We need to ascertain what works best where and try to replicate that across the board.

We also have to be mindful that it is not only in schools where support is required and where hugely positive interventions can be made. We need to look at the support that can be given to families at home, especially in those early days after diagnosis, and how we can help families to prepare, adjust and cope better.

1.45 pm

To conclude, we certainly support the motion and amendment No 1. In terms of how the training should look, I would say that it should have input from individuals who are living with autism in both its design and its delivery. It is also worth highlighting that the better our staff in schools can cope with autism, the better it will be for all pupils in our schools.

Mr Robinson: First and foremost, I thank my colleagues for tabling this very important motion and, indeed, the amendments. I am sure that all MLAs in the Chamber recognise the challenges that come with autism. Therefore, it is essential that all staff working with autistic children realise that they are appreciated and valued by the Assembly.

Looking through the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, I have been struck by the interdepartmental working that is required to ensure that people with autism have the best possible services. One Department specifically named in the Act is Education. This is entirely correct. Teachers have a challenging role, but when a child with autism is in the class, an additional level of expertise is required to ensure a good level of education for that pupil. It is therefore eminently sensible that teachers are given the tools required to achieve the best education possible for the specific pupil. Regardless of what disabilities or problems pupils have, they all deserve to attain their maximum possible potential in an educational setting. Ensuring that teachers and classroom assistants are given the correct training is a step in achieving that.

We are all aware of the challenges that local education faces in general, but I ask the Minister to explore the introduction of mandatory autism training to ensure the best possible educational outcomes for all pupils, even those on reduced timetables. One parent has told me that an entire class will benefit from such an approach, as the training aids the staff in dealing proactively with autistic pupils and minimises the time required to deal with a specific pupil. All pupils will therefore benefit from teachers receiving training. Minister, I appreciate that budgets are very tight in your Department; however, some investment in this aspect of teacher training will provide tangible and very worthwhile benefits for those children with autism. I support the motion.

Mr Carroll: I put out word to my constituents about this topic, and I have been overwhelmed by messages, emails and responses from people with autism, parents, teachers and classroom assistants. I am sure that other Members are the same. Indeed, it is fair to say I have been inundated on the issue since I was first elected to the Chamber in 2016, almost four years ago.

It is very clear that our current system is not working for too many people with autism and many with other learning disabilities. Education workers who have been in the field for years tell of a dire situation within our education system, where fundamental problems see children left under-supported. Too many are unable to get statemented, too many are left with no offer from a school each September because of their statement, and too many do not get the proper educational support even when they have been statemented.

All those failings can have serious impacts going forward. We see people with autism experiencing mental health problems because of a lack of support services, and we see children underachieving educationally because of a lack of provision. We also have working-class families being forced to pay privately to get their children diagnosed with autism. None of this is good enough, and it is totally unacceptable.

None of this touches on the impact of under-provision and misrepresentation outside of school time, such as the fact that people have to fundraise to pay for respite or even basic facilities and services, or the fact that negative and harmful stereotypes about people with autism are still perpetuated in society. Disgracefully, autism was used last week by a Fine Gael elected member as a slur on somebody else in the general election campaign in the South. Too often, the term has been used as an attempt to delegitimise Greta Thunberg's campaign and as a slur against her. People with autism deserve much better than that, but, unfortunately, on these issues they are being failed.

We absolutely endorse training and education as essential criteria for supporting people with autism, but we also know that much more must be done on top of that to slash waiting times and to address the wider issues such as underinvestment in education in general, bigger class sizes and a lack of access to classroom assistants, to name but a few.

We are clear that, whatever mandatory training is put in place, it must not be a tick-box exercise but must be wide-reaching and encompass all the research that has been found to support children with autism. It should be adaptive to react to the different levels and types of support that different pupils with different needs require. We must ensure that the development of this training programme has the input of people with autism and of teachers and classroom assistants who are across the current failings in the system and who know that, because of educational attainment or gender, some children can be overlooked or dismissed as acting out.

We absolutely must ensure that our teachers and classroom assistants, who do the utmost to support their classes and their children and who are already overworked and due a pay rise, see the necessary investment in education to ensure that children with autism get the support they deserve in a sustainable way. To do that, we must address the underspend in education. Without extra support, extra funding and extra classroom assistants, the whole provision of extra training may be futile, because under-pressure teachers and assistants may not have the time or space to put the whole thing into practice.

Finally, and importantly, we have to be careful that the provision of mandatory training for autism in mainstream schools is not used as an excuse to shut down special

needs schools. In 2018, I led a campaign alongside teachers, classroom assistants, trade unionists, parents and pupils of special needs schools in Belfast against the closure of special needs schools, and I have no doubt that, if plans emerge again to try to shut down or amalgamate special needs schools, a similar campaign will be back on the streets of our city of Belfast, with all the ferocity that existed before.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House should take its ease until then. The Minister has been allocated 15 minutes to respond, and the Members who will make winding-up speeches on the amendments have been allocated five minutes each. We are less than 10 minutes away from 2.00 pm, so I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Brexit: Movement of Goods

1. **Mrs Barton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any discussions they have had with the Department for Exiting the European Union regarding the movement of goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. (AQO 1/17-22)

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Following the recent debate in the Assembly, the deputy First Minister and I wrote to Secretary of State Barclay to advise that the Assembly had not agreed that the United Kingdom Government should legislate on its behalf in relation to aspects of the withdrawal agreement Bill. We also took the opportunity to highlight that we will be engaging with the Government to ensure that the commitments around unfettered access in the New Decade, New Approach agreement are fulfilled. We also expressed our concern that the UK Government were in breach of the Sewel convention, under which they should not normally legislate on devolved matters here without the Assembly's consent.

Our junior Ministers also highlighted the need for commitments around unfettered access to be delivered when they attended the EU Exit Operations Cabinet Committee, which is chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP. At last week's JMC (EN) meeting, the deputy First Minister and I again explained the importance of unfettered access for our businesses within the UK internal market, and a commitment was given that there should be a dedicated work stream to take forward issues relating to the protocol. Aside from ministerial-level engagement, I am aware that my officials and officials from other Departments are consistently articulating our needs to their colleagues in Whitehall. Members will be well aware that there have been contradictory statements by the UK Government and the European Commission on the implications of the protocol for the movement of goods from GB to Northern Ireland. The deputy First Minister and I have written to the Prime Minister, pointing out that, on the face of it, the protocol and statements from the European Commission seem to create legal obligations to apply checks that would fall on us as a devolved Administration and asking for urgent clarification of his Government's plan on this point.

Ensuring the freest possible movement of goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, as well as unfettered access for Northern Ireland goods to Great Britain, is a top priority for us, given the integrated nature of supply chains. It is also important to ensure that Northern Ireland businesses remain competitive and that costs for consumers do not rise. I assure the Member that we will continue to ensure that our requirements around unfettered access, competitiveness and the integrated

nature of our economy are understood right across the UK Government.

Mrs Barton: Will Northern Ireland businesses and farms continue to operate under EU regulations?

Mrs Foster: As the Member is aware, we are leaving the European Union in a different way, insofar as the single market regulations will continue to apply to Northern Ireland. We want to find out whether that means that there will be checks coming from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. It is important that we understand the nature of those to make sure that we have the unfettered access that has been promised and that there are ways in which we can communicate what we need for the Northern Ireland economy through the many JMC processes that have been put in place.

Mr O'Toole: The First Minister is correct that Brexit and delivery of the Northern Ireland protocol in the next year — in fact, in the next eight months — will be completely critical to businesses and households here. Is she satisfied that the Northern Ireland Civil Service is adequately resourced to deal with the extraordinary complexity of implementing this novel protocol? Will she give an update on that resourcing and the attention that she and the deputy First Minister are giving to it?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I put on record my thanks to the Civil Service, which took up the burden of representing Northern Ireland at a lot of the Joint Ministerial Committee meetings when we did not have an Executive or Assembly in place. It was a difficult job for them to undertake, because, for those of us who know, many civil servants cannot take political opinions on these issues and they had to play it with a very straight bat. I put on record my thanks to David Sterling and his team and Andrew McCormick for their work.

Going forward, resourcing is, obviously, something that the deputy First Minister and I will keep a close eye on. We decided to go to Cardiff ourselves last week, because we wanted to make sure that we were fully up to date with what was going on in the discussions. It is fair to say that there was quite a robust discussion between the devolved Administrations and the Westminster Government. We will continue to keep a keen eye on the matter so that we can be supported by our civil servants. If there is a need for more resource, we will certainly put it in place.

Ms Armstrong: The First Minister mentioned the trade sector, but the service sector also imports and exports. What consideration has she given to and what discussion has she had about the service sector under Brexit?

Mrs Foster: The Member will know that we rely on the Department for the Economy to give us a breakdown of the different sectors, and we have received that from our Economy Minister. In looking at the sectors, the goods sector — the manufacturing sector — is the most important by volume. We realise, however, that the service sector will be very important as well. We have not forgotten about that; indeed, at our first meeting of the subgroup on Brexit tomorrow, we will look at the way ahead on all those matters.

HIA Victims: Compensation

2. **Ms Dillon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when compensation payments for victims of historical institutional abuse will be made. (AQO 2/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I pay tribute to the hard work of the campaigners. It has been a long and difficult journey, and it is their commitment that has got us to this point. The process took too long; yet, I am pleased for the victims of that terrible abuse that we have got to this point.

It is planned that the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board application process will be open to victims and survivors at the end of March 2020. The redress board multidisciplinary panels will be available to sit from the end of April, with the first approved awards to follow shortly thereafter. Work to deliver on those challenging timescales is proceeding at pace.

Ms Dillon: Will the First Minister also confirm where exactly the money is coming from? That is a concern that has come to me from the victims' sector. Whilst we have been given guarantees that it will happen and reassurances that the money is there, we have no detail of where it is coming from.

Mrs Foster: I reassure victims that the money will have to be found. We have given a commitment that we will follow through on the report and the many recommendations that were put in place, and we intend to do that. We will engage on the issue not only with the Westminster Government but with the many institutions that have been involved throughout the years. It is incumbent on those institutions to step forward as well, not only in a moral way but to make financial redress. That is something that we will continue to take up.

Mr McGrath: Will the First Minister give an update on the appointment of the Commissioner for Survivors of Childhood Institutional Abuse?

Mrs Foster: We are in the process of doing that. If the Member bears with me, I will get him the details. The role of the commissioner is not only to assist victims and survivors through the redress process but to examine the support services available. Work is ongoing to appoint the commissioner, and the interim advocate continues in the absence of one. The public appointments competition for the post will be launched shortly. A competition usually takes about three to six months after an appointment is advertised for, so I presume that, once the appointments process starts, it will be anything between three and six months for the commissioner to be in place.

Ms Bunting: What engagement has there been with the institutions and religious orders regarding their contribution to funding the costs? Also, will the Executive Office make recommendations to have the Kincora files opened? In circumstances in which the inquiry found no state collusion, dates of 2085 and 2060 seem excessive and would mean the victims of that depravity will likely not live to see the files opened.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. In terms of the first part of her question, we — the First Minister and the deputy First Minister — want to engage directly with the institutions. The head of the Civil Service wrote to six of the institutions on 25 November 2019 about how we might share costs and about those institutions making

records available. However, the deputy First Minister and I believe that it would send a strong message if we both engaged with the institutions as well, and we intend to do that.

In terms of the latter issue that the Member raised, she knows that the inquiry devoted a number of days of oral hearings to looking in a rigorous way at what went on in Kincora boys' home. The Hart report detailed a range of system failings leading to systematic abuse by authorities and staff. For those victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse from Kincora, it is important to emphasise that they can make applications to the redress board for compensation. As I said, that will, hopefully, be in place by March 2020.

I am certainly happy for the Member to engage with officials or with me in relation to the other specific issue she raised about the opening of files.

New Decade, New Approach: Coordination

3. **Mr G Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they plan to coordinate the implementation of New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 3/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As an Executive, we are very mindful of the need for timely and effective implementation of the New Decade, New Approach agreement. The commitments in the agreement are a challenging and ambitious programme, requiring effective governance arrangements to ensure delivery. Officials will bring forward proposals for the establishment of a dedicated programme to coordinate and drive forward this work in a formal and structured way.

Mr G Kelly: Like us all, the Minister will know that agreements are one thing and implementation is an entirely different proposition. I hope that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will bring regular reports about implementation and the timescales that she mentioned in her answer.

Mrs Foster: Annex F of the document lays out the arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the agreement. There is an acknowledgement that, just as the Member has indicated, it is one thing to have an agreement but it is another thing to implement it. Therefore, there is a need to have implementation review meetings that will include the Northern Ireland Executive party leaders. There will be quarterly meetings. The first meeting was meant to be held before the end of January, but, as we are only up and running, I imagine that that will happen in the next couple of weeks. Then we will look at an implementation programme and timetable to be agreed at that meeting. Of course, the UK Government and the Irish Government will be involved as appropriate, according to the three-stranded approach, and then quarterly updates on progress will be published. That is important as well, in terms of openness and transparency: that we publish the implementation of the agreement.

Mr Allister: It is certainly a new decade, but does the First Minister really think that it is a new approach? Does she really think that her partner in government, Sinn Féin, is committed to making Northern Ireland work as a part of the United Kingdom, or is the real commitment to use the institutions as a stepping stone with the hope and expectation that, before the decade is out, they can

progress the extraction of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom even further?

Mrs Foster: I say to the Member that everyone has their own political philosophies as to where they would like to see Northern Ireland in 10 years' time. He knows very keenly that the deputy First Minister and I have different views on where we would like to see Northern Ireland, but, in terms of the common ground, we want to see work being done to deal with the issues identified in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. He will know that that concentrates on health, on education and on the fact that we need more and better jobs and that we need to look at our infrastructure. It is important that we focus on what unites the people of Northern Ireland, and what unites them is that they want to see a functioning Executive that delivers for all of its people.

Mr Beattie: Given the First Minister's freshly articulated concerns about legacy proposals in the Stormont House Agreement, was she as surprised as the Ulster Unionist Party was when they were contained in the deal?

2.15 pm

Mrs Foster: I say to the Member that I always find it helpful when we are talking about documents to go back to the original document, and I have before me the Stormont House Agreement. In that agreement, at paragraph 30, it states:

"The body will take forward outstanding cases from the HET process, and the legacy work of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland".

Part of the difficulty at the moment is that the HIU has lost the confidence of victims and survivors. That concerns me greatly, and, so, in my capacity as DUP leader, I wrote to the Secretary of State about that matter last week. When you look at the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, you will see that it talks about the fact that there needs to be an intensive process of engagement. I think that we do need an intensive process of engagement, because it is important that we deal with legacy. We cannot allow it to continue to be an open wound in Northern Ireland. Legacy needs to be dealt with, and it needs to be dealt with in a way in which everyone feels a part of it and has a stake in the process.

Brexit: Executive Subcommittee

4. **Dr Archibald** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the terms of reference and membership of the Executive subcommittee on Brexit. (AQO 4/17-22)

12. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on establishing the Executive subcommittee on Brexit. (AQO 12/17-22)

13. **Dr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on establishing the Executive subcommittee on Brexit, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 13/17-22)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4, 12 and 13 together. All Members will appreciate that ensuring Northern Ireland's interests are properly represented as we move forward through the next stage of Brexit negotiations is of paramount importance to us. The Executive subcommittee on Brexit issues will

be a key structure in the coordination and development of our response. The deputy First Minister and I have tabled proposals on the subcommittee to Executive colleagues, and I am pleased to advise the House that the Executive agreed to the establishment of the subcommittee and approved its terms of reference.

A copy of the terms of reference will be placed in the Library, but, in summary, the subcommittee will support the Executive by providing a forum for collective discussion and consideration of the implications of EU exit on Northern Ireland in relation to influencing negotiations. It will also agree Northern Ireland policy positions and devolved responsibilities for consideration and decision-making by the UK Government and Joint Committee, as well as developing proposals to maximise our influence and any opportunities arising from the withdrawal agreement, including the Northern Ireland protocol. It will also commission an assessment of the impact on the institutions and on relationships North/South and east-west.

The subcommittee will be chaired by the deputy First Minister and me, and the other core members are: the Minister for the Economy, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the Minister for Infrastructure, the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Health. Those are the Ministers of the Departments most greatly impacted by Brexit, and that membership satisfies the commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement that all parties on the Executive should have representation. Other Ministers can be invited to attend should items of particular interest to their portfolio be discussed.

It is intended that the first meeting of the subcommittee will be held tomorrow, and I am confident that the wide-ranging membership of the subcommittee will allow us to consider Brexit in a holistic way.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her response. On Friday afternoon, I met Border Communities Against Brexit, and it was keen to emphasise the need to engage with stakeholders in the next phase of the negotiations. What measures will be put in place to ensure that sectors can have an input into the work of the subcommittee?

Mrs Foster: As we are only having our first meeting proper tomorrow, I imagine that this is one of the issues that will come up: how we engage with other stakeholders, experts and people who want to send us information on how they see matters developing, as well as, of course, looking at our own agenda for how we move forward. So, I am sure that we will consider that at the subcommittee.

Ms McLaughlin: You talked about engaging with other sectors throughout the process. Will there be a formal structure whereby you get advice from academics and businesses in order to plot the way forward in the coming months?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I have no doubt that the voice of businesses will be heard, as it has been heard right throughout the process. I want to pay tribute, indeed, to those involved in businesses, the retail sector and all of those different business organisations — the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Chamber of Commerce — that have raised their voice about the many issues that have been raised as a result of our leaving the European Union. I have no doubt that

we will continue to engage with them. As I said, we have to have our first meeting tomorrow, and, following that, we will set out an agenda as to how we intend to engage with all of those people.

Dr Aiken: If we are, in the Prime Minister's words today, and pardon the accent:

“ready for the great multidimensional game of chess ... limbering up to use nerves and muscles and instincts that this country has not had to use for half a century.”

will the First Minister and deputy First Minister give assurances that they will update the Assembly on progress regularly through the proper channels, and not go straight to the media?

Mrs Foster: As the Member is aware. Well, I am not sure that he is aware, but he should note that we are here talking about the setting up of the subcommittee on Brexit. There has been no press release that I am aware of on the matter. We have our first meeting tomorrow. The Executive Committee will have scrutiny of the work of the Brexit subcommittee, because, of course, the Brexit subcommittee reports back to the Executive Office, which, in turn, will be scrutinised by the Executive Committee. I am sure that we will also be on the Floor talking about a number of issues, because the complex nature of where we are at this time will require us to have ongoing dialogue with many Members, as well as with the Ministers involved in the Brexit subcommittee.

Regional Trauma Network

5. **Miss McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of a regional trauma network for victims and survivors of the Troubles. (AQO 5/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The regional trauma network is a partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors aimed at improving access to high-quality trauma services. The Department of Health leads on health and social care aspects and the Executive Office supports the provision of care, support and treatment to victims and survivors. Peace IV funding secured by the Victims and Survivors Service has supported the establishment of a network of health and well-being caseworkers for victims and survivors and will support the roll-out and delivery of the regional trauma network. We hope that phase 1 of the service will be launched in the coming months.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the First Minister for her response. I am sure she will join me in welcoming the financial support that is now being given to those victims who were injured through no fault of their own — something that has been long fought for. Will the regional trauma network, as developed, meet the requirement and expectation of the Stormont House Agreement?

Mrs Foster: I believe that it will. It is a network that continues to be rolled out. I met a victims' group in my constituency on Friday, and they told me that there is continuous dialogue between the Executive Office and the victims' groups. That is very good. I know that there has been frustration that it had not been moving along as quickly as it should have been, but I think that there has been good progress in the past couple of months in relation to governance structures, for example. The victims' groups still have a number of limited concerns,

particularly about exclusivity, but we hope that we can work through those difficulties in the coming months so that the regional trauma network can become a real and lasting legacy to all of those who have suffered as a result of violence.

Mr Nesbitt: Miss McIlveen's question describes the regional trauma network as a service for victims and survivors rather than a more general service within the NHS, which is open to all. That is my understanding of its genesis and its purpose. Does the First Minister agree that the regional trauma network is specifically for victims and survivors of the conflict?

Mrs Foster: There have been differing interpretations of the original commitment in the Stormont House Agreement. I have mentioned that there is ongoing engagement between our office and many of the victims' groups as to whether the network should be open to all those who have significant psychological trauma or whether it should be exclusive to victims and survivors. I know that the Member has had a very clear view in relation to this issue. Of course, Health has a different view, because it takes the view that access to the network should be based on clinical need rather than a patient's background. However, this is something on which we need to continue to work to try to find a solution, because it is important that we find a solution with which victims feel content and happy.

Mr McGlone: What discussions has the First Minister's Department had with the Irish Government in relation to the provision of regional trauma centres to address the legacy of the conflict across the entire island?

Mrs Foster: I do not have the detail with me, but I am happy to write to the Member.

Ms Dillon: My question on the regional trauma network is similar to Mike Nesbitt's question. We have been leading a number of conversations with TEO and the Department of Health, and we understood from the last meeting that, as part of the Stormont House mechanisms, there was some movement with the regional trauma network not being exclusively for those who were injured by the conflict but, first and foremost, for those who were injured by the conflict. Will the First Minister confirm whether this is how we are moving forward?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. It is my understanding that those conversations are continuing. Our Department is working closely with the Department of Health, the Health and Social Care Board and the Victims and Survivors Service to ensure that the network delivers on the Stormont House Agreement by increasing access for victims and survivors to mental health services, which they need. The issue the Member identifies is whether it is exclusively for those victims and survivors or primarily for those victims and survivors, and we need to continue to work on the issue.

Mental Well-being and Resilience: Working Group

6. **Mr Middleton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their Department's role in the new working group on mental well-being and resilience. (AQO 6/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I am very aware of the Member's keen interest in this subject. I am pleased to inform him that, this morning, the Executive agreed to establish what will be known as the Executive working group on mental well-being, resilience and suicide prevention. This takes forward to the next stage the commitment made by the Executive Committee at their meeting on 22 January 2020. The deputy First Minister and I will attend meetings of the working group. I hope that we will be able to contribute valuable knowledge from our Department's experience of supporting a wide range of programmes that strengthen provision and capacity in this critical area. The Minister of Health will convene an early first meeting of the working group.

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their commitment in this area. Will the First Minister give a commitment that the views of our many mental health experts in Northern Ireland will be taken into account in the progress of the working group?

Mrs Foster: I can certainly say that we will listen very carefully to what clinical experts have to say. For those of us who do not have the expertise, the Executive Committee as a whole felt that we needed to send out a clear message that we hear the many voices of desperation around mental well-being and the need for resilience and suicide prevention.

We want to send a clear message that we are listening to those voices but, more than that, that we want to do something tangible about those issues. We will engage with experts, and we already intervene through Executive Office programmes and through many of the Departments across Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that we have been struck, since the Executive have reformed, about the very real, tangible need to do more in relation to this important issue.

Ms S Bradley: I welcome the announcement of the Executive working group. What consideration has the First Minister, along with the deputy First Minister, given to the appointment of a junior Minister for mental health and well-being?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. The deputy First Minister and I have discussed this issue. However, we believe that we should all be mental health champions. The cross-ministerial group on suicide prevention from the last Executive was located in the Department of Health. On this occasion, we felt that we should have it in the Department at the very centre of government to send a strong message that all the Ministers, from the First Minister and deputy First Minister and including all those who sit round the Executive table, are taking the issue of mental well-being seriously, and that is why we felt that it is important to put it in the Executive Office. We are not closing our mind to other structures in the future, but this is our first attempt to send out a message that we want to deal with the issue in a meaningful way.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That brings us to the end of the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Brexit: Ethnic Minorities

T1. **Mr McHugh** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures they will put in place to ensure that our society is welcoming and accommodating to ethnic minorities and new communities in the context of Brexit. (AQT 1/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The first thing to say to the Member is that we are all ambassadors for Northern Ireland, as MLAs individually, and it is important that we articulate the view that all our citizens, whatever their background, are very welcome here. I was, as I am sure he was, appalled at the attack in Omagh at the weekend. I do not have the full details of it, but it appears to have been a hate-crime attack, and it is something that I condemn wholeheartedly. We must do that in order to make sure that people realise that we are a welcoming society here in Northern Ireland and that we value the input of people, regardless of from where they come.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. I, too, condemn entirely the attack in Omagh. We as a nation have always been very welcoming. We are well known as the nation of the céad míle fáilte. Will the First Minister look to increase the budget to address what might be a developing problem?

Mrs Foster: It is something that we keep under review when considering our budget. As well as that, in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, there is to be set up an office of identity and cultural expression. That new office will promote cultural pluralism, respect for diversity, including Northern Ireland's ethnic, national, linguist and faith communities. It is a very powerful statement in and of itself that we want not only to recognise the Irish identity and the British identity but to recognise those people who are of neither identity but who live here in Northern Ireland and whom we want to make sure feel welcome.

New Decade, New Approach: Executive Office Support

T2. **Mrs Barton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Executive Office is fully in support of all aspects of the New Decade, New Approach deal, including the Irish language legislation and the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement proposals on legacy. (AQT 2/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I have already indicated that there are some issues that we need to deal with in and around the Stormont House Agreement. This is the part that concerns the United Kingdom Government. It states:

"As part of the Government's" —

that is, the United Kingdom Government —

"wider legislative agenda ... The Government will now start an intensive process with the Northern Ireland parties, and the Irish Government as appropriate, to maintain a broad-based consensus on these issues".

That is something that we need to be very much alert to and to make sure that it happens.

The Irish language piece is, of course, part of annex E, on "Rights, language and identity". That is in the framework. I have already mentioned the office of identity and cultural

expression, then there is the Irish language commissioner and the British commissioner. Therefore, all those are in that context. We have to recognise and make space for all our identities here in Northern Ireland. That is something that the Executive Office is committed to doing.

Mrs Barton: First Minister, I thank you for your answer. Can you give me any idea of what discussions have taken place in the Executive Office about those issues?

Mrs Foster: As the Member will know, we have been in office since 11 January. In response to a substantive question from Mr Kelly about the implementation of the agreement, I stated that we will be setting up various processes to make sure that the agreement is implemented, and that is the way that we will make sure that things are taken forward.

University Sector

T3. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the small size of the university sector and the shortage of graduates in our labour market and how challenging that is to the economy, whether they agree and what they intend to do about it. (AQT 3/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As the Member will be fully aware, that matter was part of the discussions in the run-up to the New Decade, New Approach agreement. We have committed to expanding university provision at Magee in line with commitments made. I presume that it is Magee that she is talking about. It is a wild guess. We have committed to the graduate-entry medical school as well, which, as I understand it, also has cross-party support.

Ms McLaughlin: At the Economy Committee last Wednesday, we were advised by a senior civil servant that there was not an adequate business case for the expansion of Magee. She specifically said that there was no business case, no funding and no desire to do it at this time, based on the unfinished business with the north Belfast campus of Ulster University. Does the First Minister have an opinion on whether this is a priority for the Executive?

Mrs Foster: Many of the issues that the Member raised are, of course, matters for the Minister for the Economy. I have no doubt that she will come forward in relation to how she is going to deal with the commitments in New Decade, New Approach. There are difficulties, which the Member is aware of, that will need to be dealt with. She also knows, particularly from her background, that when we go to do anything in government, we need a business case and we need to process that. Those are matters that would probably be better taken up with the Minister for the Economy.

Brexit: NSMC/BIC Assistance

T4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister about the role of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in facing up to the challenges presented by Brexit and whether, if those matters are approached in a positive manner, through the NSMC and the British-Irish Council (BIC), those bodies can be of assistance. (AQT 4/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I suppose the short answer is yes, both North/South and east-west. The new Brexit subcommittee will commission some work on the institutions in Northern

Ireland but also on what is happening North/South and east-west; it is important that we have a clear view on what is happening. The Member may remember from his time in the last Executive that, at the North/South Ministerial Council, we had a good discussion on Brexit and moving forward. It is useful to have those conversations, and I am a big advocate of using the British-Irish element of the Belfast Agreement in the way that it should be used. It previously was not, possibly because people were meeting up in Europe or whatever, but there is an opportunity to use the British-Irish Council model to have that engagement between Westminster, Dublin, Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and the smaller islands that are part of the BIC as well.

Mr O'Dowd: I have no difficulty with that response: east-west and North/South relationships on these islands are vital across a range of issues. Particularly in relation to Brexit, it is important that we use our influence wherever we can. So, whether that is North/South or east-west, I have no difficulty with that.

Mrs Foster: Yes, and we will use our influence on those matters. It is also important to say that the deputy First Minister and I intend to use our influence, now that we are able to attend the Joint Ministerial Committee meetings again, to put forward the specific needs of Northern Ireland, particularly in the context of the Northern Ireland protocol. That will be challenging, so we need to use all those processes to make sure that our voice is heard.

Pensions: Victims and Survivors

T5. **Mr Lunn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they are satisfied that there will be sufficient budget provision on an ongoing basis to cover pensions for victims and survivors, given the Secretary of State's commitment on the issue over the weekend. (AQT 5/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I welcome the laying of the regulations on Friday by the Northern Ireland Office. As the Member knows, the regulations provide that a board be established to oversee the scheme. Our officials are working with other Departments to progress the implementation of the scheme by May 2020. Whatever about the money, which I am going to come to, the deadline to have all the architecture in place is very challenging. We do not get any extra finance from Westminster to deal with this issue. That is something that we intend to continue raising with the Government at Westminster, because, at present, it is my understanding that the money will come from the block grant.

Mr Lunn: I thank the First Minister for that answer. Pension payments, by their nature, are open-ended and difficult to predict. Is there any estimate for the total cost of the scheme?

Mrs Foster: Ordinarily, I would say that the Member is right about the amount, but I understand that it has been capped between £2,000 and £10,000 in relation to a top-up of perhaps other pensions that people may be already in receipt of. It is difficult to put a figure on the scheme at present because, of course, we do not know how many people are suffering from psychological trauma, and, therefore, those people will have to be referred to the redress board. It is something that we will have to keep under consideration as the scheme becomes live at the end of May.

Mental Health Champion

T6. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in line with their commitment to mental health and well-being, including their response to the call for a junior Minister for mental health, whether they would consider appointing a mental health champion as an independent service, as suggested to the Health Minister in a previous mandate, rather than us all being mental health champions. (AQT 6/17-22)

Mrs Foster: All those things will be considered in our new subgroup. There is a real willingness to look at all and any ideas that come forward as a way to deal with those very serious issues in our society. We will certainly not pretend to have the monopoly on wisdom when it comes to dealing with huge societal issues. We want to take as much information as we can and try to do what we can with the limited budget that we have. Let us be honest: it is not always about budget when we come to deal with these issues; it is about sending out very positive signals about leadership and the fact that we are listening to people's concerns.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. I pay my respect to you both for stepping forward on this issue. I ask you to do everything that you can to support the Minister of Health in that collegiate approach. Will you make a commitment to doing so?

Mrs Foster: We absolutely make the commitment to support the Minister of Health. As I said, up to now, suicide prevention was led by the Department of Health. There was absolutely nothing wrong with that, but we wanted to send out a signal that it was coming from the very centre of government and that we were taking the issue very seriously. We look forward to working with Robin and all the other Ministers on the subgroups so that we can move ahead.

Pensions: Victims and Survivors

T8. **Mr Clarke** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the Secretary of State's announcement at the weekend, when the first payments will reach the victims and survivors of the Troubles. (AQT 8/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As I indicated to Mr Lunn, we are on a very tight schedule to get the architecture in place by the end of May 2020. We hope that we will be able to have applications through by then. I hope that it will be mostly a paper-based scheme, avoiding the need to have assessments face to face, but, in some of the more complex areas, we may need to have those. I listened carefully to what the Victims' Commissioner said about that issue this morning. I very much hope that, rather than it being an intrusive process, it will be as easy as we can make it for victims and survivors.

Mr Clarke: I thank the First Minister for her response. The announcement at the weekend goes some way to restoring the confidence of people who were injured during the Troubles through no fault of their own. However, given that there has been a historical problem with the definition of "victim", is there any further work that can be done so that there is no ambiguity and those who perpetrated murder in this country can be dealt with in a different way?

Mrs Foster: I think that the Member will realise that the Executive Office Ministers have different views on that matter. Undoubtedly, each of the political parties will

make their views known on the definition of "victim" to the Secretary of State because the legislation is Westminster-based.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a second or two before we move on to questions to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

2.45 pm

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

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Brexit: Basic Payment Scheme

1. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assurances he can provide farmers that their businesses will not be negatively impacted by the loss of the basic payment scheme following the withdrawal from the European Union. (AQO 15/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I welcome the Member's interest in the subject. I am sure that all the farmers in North Belfast will be delighted with her putting the question down.

I will be making an announcement shortly on the arrangements and funding for direct payments in the 2020 scheme year. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury, at the end of December 2019, confirmed that the UK Government will provide the same financial support to CAP pillar 1 for 2020 as for the 2019 scheme year. Last week, the Northern Ireland Assembly agreed a legislative consent motion on the Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill. This allowed the provisions of the UK Bill to extend and apply to Northern Ireland and to provide continuity for direct payments for the 2020 scheme year. The Bill has now completed its stages in Parliament and became law on 31 January. On that basis, I expect the 2020 scheme year to operate in a broadly similar way to 2019. In relation to future years, the Conservative Party manifesto stated that funding for farm support would be maintained at existing levels until the end of this Parliament. While the schemes themselves may change across the UK, I anticipate that the funding levels will be maintained up until 2024. My Department will continue to work on developing policy in the longer term, and I will be looking at what future payments can do to support sustainable farming and our landscape.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister should know that I have been following the issue of single farm payments in North Belfast eagerly, given the announcement that he made last week, so it should come as no surprise to him.

On the matter of ensuring that the basic payments are maintained, will the Minister make arrangements to meet the British Treasury, particularly in the light of Brexit, to ensure that the payments are not detrimentally impacted?

Mr Poots: I have already raised the issue with the Prime Minister, particularly the fact that Northern Ireland, as a producer of around 10% of food in the UK, cannot go down the route of a Barnett formula being applied to this. That would be 2.8%, which would be a huge, detrimental loss

to the farming community here. I further raised that with Theresa Villiers, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and I raised it this morning with Minister Duncan. Thus far, I have got good feedback from all three, and I will continue to press that issue.

Mr O'Toole: Brexit threatens the very fabric and foundation of agriculture, farming and rural communities in Northern Ireland. I know that the Minister supported Brexit — that is his right — and he is entitled to celebrate it, but, since we know that Brexit threatens the majority of farmers' income in Northern Ireland, notwithstanding the statements that he has made about the next few years and the partial guarantees that we have over farm income, and that there is the threat of cheap food coming in as a result of trade deals that Boris Johnson wants to sign around the world, while I would not want the Minister to recant his support for Brexit, can I ask him that he use his office and the platform and role that he has to stand up for the closest possible alignment between the United Kingdom and the European Union? That is, I am sure, what the Ulster Farmers' Union and all farming representatives will tell him.

Mr Poots: I take the Member's remarks as being condescending towards the farming community, because the feedback that I got from the farming community was that they extensively backed leaving the European Union. If anybody wants an evidence base for that, I should say that the farmers' union held a meeting at Balmoral to which 600 farmers turned up and there was a 90% vote in favour of leaving the European Union. Farmers know more about what will affect them and their future than the Member who asked the question, representing South Belfast and having only returned from London to do so.

I would say that 80% to 90% of the regulation in Europe is currently also the case in Australia and large parts of North America and other key areas. Regulatory alignment already exists in many areas. However, are you telling me that, for example, the slurry ban has been good for Northern Ireland? It has not. Farmers have not been able to get out and do that activity for the past month when the weather lent itself to doing it. Are you telling me that it is a good thing that farmers have to request permission to clean out a sheugh and a departmental official is supposed to give that to them? Are you telling me that it is a good thing that a farmer is not allowed to plough over the winter because of soil erosion, which does not exist in this damp climate? Those are not good regulations, and I would happily diverge from what Brussels has instructed us to do. Many of the 2,800 regulations that have been imposed on us since 1974 are not fit for purpose in Northern Ireland.

Mr Blair: The Minister will be aware from the debate last week on the legislative consent mechanism that there is real concern out there that the measures emanating from that LCM do not totally cover all the pillars that are covered by the existing CAP. What action has the Minister taken to address that? If he has not done so already, will he meet the Ulster Farmers' Union to discuss that?

Mr Poots: I am meeting the farmers' union tomorrow. If they have issues of concern, I will be happy to listen. All the evidence that I have found shows that we will be able to carry out everything that was in the CAP pillar 1, with one exception, which is a very good exception: because of EU rules, in October 2019, we gave farmers 70% of the funding; in October 2020, because we are out of the

European Union, we will give 100% to farmers. I do not think that the farmers' union will object to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Flooding: Compensation

3. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the granting of de minimis aid for farmers affected by flooding in the Sperrins in 2017. (AQO 17/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware of the difficulties experienced by the farmers affected by flooding in 2017. In the immediate aftermath of the flood, workshops were held in affected areas to provide advice and practical support covering farm management issues and land restoration. Technical bulletins were also issued, and, more recently, officials have met local residents to explore well-being and business development matters.

In terms of financial assistance, in 2017, the Department took steps to make enhanced advance CAP payments at a rate of 70% to help to alleviate cash flow issues experienced by farmers. In addition, the Department approved force majeure declarations on affected farmland that had been submitted for basic payment scheme support at the time, thus ensuring that there was no reduction in those payments due to flood damage. DAERA has since provided half a million pounds of funding to the Loughs Agency to carry out remedial riparian fencing works in the worst affected areas. That repair work commenced in November 2019 and is ongoing. Under its statutory conservation and protection remit, the Loughs Agency continues to undertake work in the affected areas.

Ms C Kelly: Will you give any timeline for when the funding will be issued to affected farms?

Mr Poots: The funding that was identified has been issued. The Department has been carrying out work on fencing that was damaged during the flood since November.

Mr T Buchanan: Will the Minister advise how, in the event of any aid package, all farmers who were affected — some were affected a lot more than others — will benefit fairly and equitably?

Mr Poots: The official recommendation is that we do not do a scheme; let us be clear about that. If we were to do a scheme, it would be a hardship scheme, which would be based on ministerial direction. Ministerial directions are used exceptionally, but, nonetheless, they are used. I used ministerial direction in a previous Department and was criticised by the media for doing it. In that instance, it was to give capital money to the Northern Ireland Hospice and to Mencap for two absolutely brilliant schemes. I was criticised for diverging from the advice of officials. If I were to do a scheme in this instance, it would be something that diverged from officials' advice and something on which I would have to give ministerial direction to do, on the basis of hardship. I have not taken that decision at this point.

Ms D Kelly: Minister, you will be aware that other areas have flooded extensively over the past number of years and some of that flooding has impacted on the local fishing community around Lough Neagh. Will any consideration be given to other industries, such as the fishing industry?

Mr Poots: The Member has just highlighted one of the problems that I would have in going against the advice of officials, because they are concerned about setting precedents. The Member has just demonstrated that this will not be confined to one area. If I take some action, others may use that as a precedent to take further action in later times.

Dr Aiken: Will de minimis aid continue to be an issue now that we are no longer a member of the EU?

Mr Poots: I can do that if I wish to, but I need to be convinced of its merits and of the true hardship that has come about as a result of what happened. There is a lot of merit in the argument being made by Members for West Tyrone that there has been real hardship caused, but, nonetheless, it will be a challenging decision for me to make and one that I want to give absolute thought to.

Ms Bailey: It is good to hear that the Minister is signalling his willingness to stick to ministerial direction. Will he be just as keen to stick to the direction from the House? I think of his decision last week not to call an inquiry into the Mobuoy waste dump despite unanimous support from all in the House to do so.

Mr Poots: That is not particularly relevant to the question. The Member will find that I am a very independent-minded person, but I also like to think that I am reasonably fair and try to take everything into account. I can deal with the issue that has been raised at the appropriate time and under appropriate questions.

Animal Cruelty Register

4. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his plans to speak to Executive colleagues and his counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom about an animal cruelty register. (AQO 18/17-22)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. I am sympathetic to the creation of a register of those convicted of animal welfare offences. However, responsibility for doing so is not entirely within my gift, as conviction data is strictly controlled and managed by the Department of Justice. The matter has been considered in detail by my Department and the Department of Justice as part of the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which was published in February 2016. The creation of such a register is very complex and would require data protection, human rights and prohibitive cost issues to be overcome. My officials have engaged with the Department of Justice on the matter and will continue to do so in order to explore whether the issues could be resolved. I am minded to raise the issue with my ministerial colleague Naomi Long, who has responsibility for the Department of Justice, in the first instance.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Minister's reply, but horrific and often stomach-churning incidents of animal cruelty have been reported in recent times. The impediments that you raise are fair, but there is an urgency in getting past them and finding a way of moving forward. Obviously, it is a changing world, but will the Minister, in his role on the Brexit committee, commit to giving an assurance that he will find ways to make sure that the culprits have no place to hide and that he will work with the UK and Irish

Governments to find a way of making a register a real, live document?

Mr Poots: I wholly appreciate the Member's view, which I share. I will outline a few of the difficulties that have been faced in other jurisdictions. In England, DEFRA has fielded similar requests and encountered similar difficulties to those found in Northern Ireland regarding access to information in a register and important legal issues around data processing and transfer.

DEFRA's view was that the Police National Computer is, to all intents, a register of offenders, though access to it is limited exclusively to the police. The RSPCA and local authorities, therefore, do not have access to the information except for limited purposes.

3.00 pm

In Wales in 2017, the Government created a ministerial task and finish group, which was chaired by the RSPCA, to explore options for an animal offenders register for Wales. The group produced a number of recommendations but was not able to recommend the development of an animal offenders register, and that view was accepted by the Minister. It found that there were significant barriers to the creation of the register — for example, the legal obstacles to data sharing that could not be overcome — and it stated that, where registers had been established, there was absence of evidence to prove their effectiveness. In particular, the group observed that, increasingly, animal welfare agencies in the USA, which first introduced registers, were concluding that they do not work.

The Republic of Ireland does not have any plans to introduce an animal offenders register, and the Scottish Government have no plans to develop a register. I actually would like to develop the register. I will engage with Minister Long to see whether we can lead the way on and overcome this issue, but I do not want the House to think that this will be easy. Clearly, if others have tried it and have not been able to deliver it, it is hugely complex.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister prove himself to be a Minister for animal welfare by introducing comprehensive anti-animal cruelty legislation that will include a ban on hunting with dogs and the use of snares?

Mr Poots: We have previously demonstrated how we support animal welfare. I was very heavily involved, as a Member of the Assembly and a member of the Justice Committee, in bringing forward the toughest legislation on cruelty to animals anywhere in these islands. So, I do not think I have to prove myself to the Member. I have already demonstrated what I am worth on these issues. We will look logically at all these matters.

Mr Clarke: I listened carefully to what the Minister said about these registers not necessarily working in other areas. I concur with that. Will the Minister, with his colleagues, work against those who finish up on a register to make sure that the penalty for those involved is much more severe than names being recorded? Many of us know the names that would appear on it anyhow.

Mr Poots: We probably all recall the awful case of Cody the dog. My colleague Mr Givan was heavily involved in raising all the issues surrounding that case, which ended in a custodial sentence. In my view, the individual who caused such suffering to that animal should never be

able to allowed to keep an animal again in his life. Other incidents have come across very clearly on our news screens over the years. People have been successfully prosecuted, and what we heard from those prosecutions is truly awful. We need to take action where we can against people who go out of their way to be cruel and do real harm to animals. One of the actions I want taken against them is that they are never able to keep animals. That is why I have substantial sympathy with the Member who asked the original question, because having a register may be helpful in allowing us to do that. I am just saying it is going to be very difficult to create it.

Waste Disposal Offences

5. Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many people have been convicted of illegal waste disposal offences in the last five years and how many of those went to prison. (AQO 19/17-22)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. Since 2015, 52 people have been convicted of illegal waste disposal offences through the criminal courts. Of the 52 convicted, one person was sentenced to a custodial term of six months' imprisonment.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister agree that that ratio of effective deterrent by way of prison sentence is disappointing? This is a scenario where very severe harm has been done by illegal waste disposal, and to find that only one person has paid with their liberty is surely disappointing. Since much of this illegal waste came, we are told, from the Republic of Ireland, what progress has there been in securing recompense from the authorities in the Republic for these matters?

Mr Poots: The Member raised two valuable issues. In terms of recompense, 17 sites were identified as having waste that emanated from the Republic of Ireland. Of those, 11 have been repatriated. Six have not. Those sites go back in excess of 10 years, because the repatriation work started when I was Minister, which was from 2009 to 2011. It started as a result of me writing to the European Commission as a Back-Bench MLA, I think in 2006. That is a course of work that started and was never completed, so once the new Minister is in place, I will be making a phone call wanting to know when they are taking the waste from the other six sites.

One of the recommendations of the Mills review after Mobuoy was that we work through the Department of Justice to persuade the judiciary of the seriousness of waste crime not just to the environment but to the economy of Northern Ireland, and to encourage them to ensure that sentencing for those offences was comparable with that in the rest of the United Kingdom. There is huge money to be made from waste crime, and slaps on the wrist will not cut it when dealing with these criminals.

Mr Durkan: Miss Bailey beat me to the question, but maybe I will beat her to the answer if I can ask the Minister to outline the rationale behind his decision to dismiss calls for a public inquiry into the huge illegal dump at Mobuoy, how that happened and, potentially, how that was allowed to happen.

Mr Poots: It is actually very appropriate to raise the question under this one, so I am happy to answer Mr

Durkan — and Miss Bailey in this instance. Even though the question came from somebody else, the sentiment came from her.

The Mills review was established subsequent to that decision in the Assembly, and it identified a number of issues. I find that inquiries tend to be slow, expensive and laborious, and they very often deliver us answers that we already knew quite a number of years in advance, so public inquiries are not always the answer. These are the recommendations, and people can make a suggestion if something has been missed, and I will be happy to listen:

"The DOE should make the outcome of a waste sector that complies with the law, protects the environment and underpins resource efficiency, a priority.

Develop a comprehensive strategy, with a detailed action plan, to achieve this outcome, which initially focuses on preventing waste crime.

Create a new single Directorate within NIEA to bring together the existing regulatory and enforcement teams along with a new Intelligence Unit to achieve this outcome.

Adopt and develop the concept of 'intelligent regulation' in order to be sufficiently adaptive to deal with a range of operators, from the criminal to the compliant.

Change the current appointment and recruitment processes to allow the targeted recruitment and appointment of staff with the right aptitudes, skills and experience to carry out regulatory work. This should be supported by structured training, professional development and a defined career structure.

Review in an integrated way the need for additional powers to carry out this work by means of a Task and Finish Group and involving all relevant DOE units including Planning with legal support and input from the PSNI."

Have I another 40 seconds, Mr Deputy Speaker? Thank you.

"Make it harder for waste to fall into the hands of criminal operators by strengthening the Duty of Care provisions, Fit & Proper Person Test and systems for monitoring and analysing waste flows.

Limit the number of waste authorisations to the number necessary to meet Northern Ireland's projected waste needs and create the necessary new strategic waste infrastructure which can be more easily regulated and monitored.

Make changes to the current planning enforcement policy to no longer allow the granting of retrospective planning permission for sand and gravel workings.

Work through the Department of Justice to persuade the Judiciary" —

Well, I have done that one.

"Create a new sanction in the legislation to make the polluter pay to remediate or remove illegally deposited waste.

Ensure that the DOE works more closely with other Government Departments and Agencies in Northern Ireland, with the other Environment Agencies in the UK and Ireland and through relevant European organisations and initiatives”.

There are a lot of things there that we could and should do.

Mr Butler: I hope the Minister's answer will be briefer this time round. In the light of the professed collegiate approach across all parties of the Assembly to protect and cherish our environment, will the Minister commit to a review of the judicial penalties for illegal waste disposal with the Minister of Justice and go further to invest in an additional aspect of education as a preventative measure for future-proofing?

Mr Poots: Fines have ranged from £100 to £40,000, and there has been a range of suspended terms of imprisonment sentences and community service orders being handed down in the criminal courts, and the majority of convictions have been on indictment at the Crown Court. We need to ensure that the penalty matches the crime, and if the crime is something where people are making hundreds of thousands — even millions of pounds — and they get a penalty of £10,000, that is not appropriate. That is something I am happy to work through and look at with the Department of Justice to ensure that the polluter pays heavily.

Mr Buckley: The Minister is well aware of the large-scale dumping of illegal tyres that I had to deal with in my constituency, at The Birches in Portadown, last week. Will he outline what his Department can do to help support rural communities that are very often left with the aftermath?

Mr Poots: The Department has a polluter pays principle, but identifying the polluter in these instances is incredibly difficult. I have been aware of this happening in quite a number of locations, even in my constituency, where a truckload of tyres is driven into the countryside, tipped in a lane and someone else has to pick up the responsibility of dealing with that. It is grossly unfair.

When I was in the DOE, there were lots of opportunities to deal with waste tyres in a way that, I believe, would have been beneficial to the environment. I regret that, some 10 years later, we are still dealing with the same problem, and there have not been the advances in dealing with waste tyres that there should have been. Obviously, the tyre companies receive money from every individual who has a tyre changed, and therefore we should be able to identify where each of those tyres goes. In instances where the companies' records do not stack up, we should be able to look at prosecution.

Mr Muir: In relation to illegal dumping and environmental crime, what plans are there to devolve more powers to local government so that they can enforce this? They are at the coalface in relation to a lot of this.

Mr Poots: I am happy to work with local government on the issue. At the minute, the NIEA takes the lead on this issue. I am not sure that it is a power that local governments necessarily want, but it is something that I am prepared to talk to the Northern Ireland Local Government Association about. If we can do it a better way, I am happy to look at doing it that way.

Miss Woods: Does the Minister agree that a budget of £143,000 per annum for cleanup of smaller scale waste deposits is enough, where the offender cannot be identified, and that that budget is being used, not reactively but effectively, to stop illegal dumping?

Mr Poots: That is a relatively small budget, and it is used in instances where we are not catching the people. Having a larger budget for that purpose may not be well placed in that, ultimately, we want to take action to stop it happening in the first place. If it does happen, we want to take action against the individuals who did it. This is the last resort, where neither of the first two options have worked. Therefore, we do not really want to see a huge amount of money expended on cleaning up after other people's bad behaviour.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Mr Robinson, we may be able to get your question in briefly here.

Farm Business Identification Numbers

6. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will review the process for allocating identification numbers to farm businesses. (AQO 20/17-22)

Mr Poots: Case numbers were required by European Commission regulations and, as we have now left the EU, my officials will take the opportunity to review the allocation process. Where possible, they will simplify and streamline the process to reduce both the administrative burden on farmers applying for business ID and the length of time that they have to wait for ID after applying, while still making sure that business IDs are only allocated to authentic farm businesses.

The process of allocating business IDs allows my officials to ensure that funding goes to genuine and separate farm businesses and that farm businesses are not artificially created to claim grants to which they are not entitled or to avoid legal obligations at farm level.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is time for a very brief supplementary question and answer.

Mr Robinson: Does the Minister agree that members of the young farmers' scheme who have been working on the farm and are taking it over or inheriting it are disadvantaged by the six-year rule under CTY 10, which prevents them applying for planning permission for a dwelling, and that could seriously affect their ability to operate their business?

3.15 pm

Mr Poots: Each farm is allowed to make an application every 10 years, and that goes with the farm, not with the individual. If there are two separate and distinct farms, they will be able to apply for two sites every 10 years. However, it needs to be the case that there is a separate and distinct farm unit.

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

Down Royal: Funding Difficulties

T1. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he is aware of the

funding difficulties facing Down Royal park, given that he will be aware that Down Royal is the only racecourse that offers grade 1 racing in the North, holding the unique place as the shopfront of the Irish equine industry here, with over 1,000 thoroughbred horses and breeders and a direct spend by the sector that is estimated by Deloitte to be between £170 million and £212 million per year, albeit that, unfortunately, Down Royal's status has been put in jeopardy due to difficulties it has experienced in drawing down funding from the horse racing fund. (AQT 11/17-22)

Mr Poots: Down Royal is in my constituency, and I am aware that a change in ownership is being used as a reason not to pay the money to Down Royal. That is entirely wrong, in my opinion. Whilst the ownership has changed, the functions and purpose of the racecourse have not changed. I support the industry — the betting and gambling industry — paying up to Down Royal in this instance.

Ms Ennis: I accept what the Minister says and that he is aware of the issue. Will he commit to sorting out the funding issues for Down Royal park? How will he prevent such an issue arising in future?

Mr Poots: Yes, we will continue to work on the issue and to see whether we can amend the regulations around it, so that, if an ownership changes but the purpose continues to be the same, others will not be able to drop out of previous agreements.

Farm Income

T2. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the steps his Department is taking to address falling farm income, which fell by a staggering 25% between 2018 and 2019 and is further compounded by the uncertainties created by Brexit. (AQT 12/17-22)

Mr Poots: When it comes to falling incomes, we live in a scenario of global markets. In some years, we will do better, because others have been less fortunate. Sometimes, there will be major floods. In Australia, for example, there have been major fires this year. Those things generally have an impact on global prices. In the last year, however, as the Member said, prices have fallen by over 25% and that is from a pretty low base in the first instance.

In the United Kingdom, in particular, there are three groups that benefit from food production: the farmers, the processors and the supermarkets. The consumer has to pay for what is offered. The farmer always seems to be the one who gets the poor return vis-à-vis the processor and, in particular, the supermarkets. Some of the things that are being imposed, particularly by the supermarkets, are grossly unfair, and they will lead to farmers receiving very poor prices.

I make the argument that the Assembly has adopted a policy of Fairtrade to ensure that coffee farmers, for example, in South America or farmers who produce quality fruit in west Africa and so forth get a decent price for their goods: we should ensure that farmers in Northern Ireland get a decent price for their goods as well.

Ms C Kelly: Does the Minister recognise that the ending of the areas of natural constraint compensatory payment is a further blow to the income of hill farmers?

Mr Poots: That decision was taken some years ago, and it finally closed in 2018. Going forward, we need to look at new ways of providing support for farmers. I indicated to the Committee on Thursday that hill farmers are so important to our ecosystem, our environment and the production of quality goods that are often finished down in the lowlands, but, nonetheless, the role of hill farmers is critical going forward. I want to devise a scheme beyond 2020 that is good for all farmers. I want it to be good for hill farmers, because I do not want them to be left behind.

Independent Environmental Protection Agency

T3. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when he envisages the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency, in light of the commitment given in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. (AQT 13/17-22)

Mr Poots: Obviously, we are having a debate on that issue later. We know that an Office for Environmental Protection is being established in GB. In all of that, is an independent environment agency in place of or in addition to the NIEA? Is an independent protection agency to oversee, for example, what the European Commission would have overseen? Is it, therefore, something that would be done alongside the NIEA, or would we see it entirely replacing the NIEA? We all need to have that discussion at Executive level to see the best way forward.

Mr Muir: With that office being established in England and Wales and with there already being an agency in Scotland and one in Ireland, do you not think that there is a risk of Northern Ireland being left behind on the British Isles with regard to environmental governance, especially in light of our exit from the European Union?

Mr Poots: We have some very good environmental standards in Northern Ireland, and the NIEA works hard on many of those things to ensure that we do our jobs well and the environment is protected. I am not opposed to an independent environmental protection agency, but I want to look at all the issues around it to see what is the best way forward. I know that, for example, in Aberdeenshire, with an independent environmental protection agency, a decision on an incinerator was passed in six months, whereas, in Northern Ireland, 10 years later, they are still arguing about one. There is the suggestion that things may be a lot tighter as a result of having an independent EPA, but they may not be. Such an agency may be less inclined to have political influence put upon it, from wherever it happens to come, be it from people who want less regulation or more regulation. We all need to look at the matter seriously, and I am certainly not ruling it out.

Air Pollution

T4. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has any plans to tackle the growing threat of air pollution, given the clear evidence that it is at dangerous levels across Belfast, with, for example, the Stockmans area of West Belfast being one of the worst flashpoints for pollution levels. (AQT 14/17-22)

Mr Poots: Certainly, one of the greatest areas of air pollution is transportation. Combustion engines are,

I suppose, the greatest source of that. The Member has indicated that there are problems in an area where cars are not moving very quickly, so going ahead and addressing one of the blockades to the movement of vehicles, which is at the Westlink/M2 interchange, would be hugely beneficial.

I also think that looking at how we can support more electric cars on the road would be beneficial. Currently, we provide all the electric points at a public cost. I know that that is being done on a 50:50 basis in the Republic of Ireland, so the private sector contributes to that. We need to be flexible and ready to move and assist people to move to electric cars. In Northern Ireland, we produce well over 40% of our electricity from renewable sources. When cars run on electricity here, there is a genuine good coming from that. However, 37% of electric in Germany, for example, comes from coal-fired power stations, so moving to an electric car in Germany may be more harmful to the environment. Northern Ireland has ploughed ahead with renewable energy, so we have a great benefit from moving down that route.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his reply. I add that investment in cycling and public transport is very important. Are the Minister and his officials happy to meet me, alongside some of the residents of the Stockmans area, to talk about what he and his Department can do to alleviate the air pollution levels?

Mr Poots: Of course we are. I am here to serve Members, because they serve the people of Northern Ireland, so I am happy to meet the Member.

Northern Ireland Food Animal Information System

Ms Ní Chuilín: Again, it is a North Belfast question.

T5. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the delays to the Northern Ireland food animal information system (NIFAIS). (AQT 15/17-22)

Mr Poots: Sorry, the Northern Ireland —?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Food animal information.

Mr Poots: I am not exactly sure of that one, so I will take a note of it and reply in writing to the Member.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is NIFAIS.

Mr Poots: OK. I will reply in writing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I presume that you will not require a supplementary question. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Ní Chuilín: If the Minister wants to know about NIFAIS, I can meet him after topical questions to give him an update. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That was a supplementary, all right, to the Minister.

I call Mike Nesbitt for a question.

Mr Nesbitt: Lucky old me.

Fishing Industry: Visas

T6. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given the fact that the local

fishing fleet is so dependent on foreign national workers, for his assessment of the negative impact of last week's ruling from the UK's migration advisory committee, which recommended that tier 2 visas should not be granted to the fishing industry. (AQT 16/17-22)

Mr Poots: I was with the fishermen in Portavogie last week. I thank Harry Harvey for being in attendance at that meeting. In particular, they raised the issue of the skills base in fishing and the fact that the people who are being brought in are recognised not as skilled workers but as labourers. Given the complexities that are involved in preparing and making nets, in the catching and identifying of fish and in all that goes with that, those involved should be recognised as a skilled workforce. Consequently, that is something that we will press on the national Government. Sadly, a lot of our young people have left the fishing industry as a consequence of the common fisheries policy and of the actions that the European Union has taken. When the United Kingdom gets its waters back — its 200-mile limit — there will be limitless opportunities for the fishing industry. Therefore, we need those people to come and support us until we get our young people back into fishing.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answer. When we do take back the powers and leave the common fisheries policy, does the Minister believe that the new policy should be set by Westminster or devolved to Stormont?

Mr Poots: The policies on fishing and on what takes place on the waters will be set by the devolved Administrations. However, policies on migration will remain in Westminster. It is therefore up to us to maximise our influence with Westminster to ensure that the right policies are applied to support what is, in Northern Ireland, an industry that is very good at producing high-quality food for the many people who live in cities in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Woodland

T7. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action he is taking to increase woodland across Northern Ireland, which stands at around 8% and is the lowest in Europe. (AQT 17/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Member is right in pointing out the figure of 8%. However, we have some of the higher margins when it comes to hedgerows. You could drive through parts of Scotland and England and see various pieces of woodland, but alongside the road there is nothing. We have a lot of hedgerows, but I am committed to increasing the number of trees that are being planted. Currently, my Department plants around 2,000 hectares a year: we want to increase that significantly.

We are planting around 2 million trees per annum, but there are great opportunities to increase that.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is time for a very brief supplementary and answer.

Mr Blair: Very briefly, does the Minister agree that there should be a joined-up approach on that with councils, NGOs and voluntary bodies to increase the woodland and, of course, the number of hedgerows?

Mr Poots: Yes, we have written to all those bodies and all the Departments asking them to contact their arm's-length

bodies, local authorities etc to see what opportunities there are to plant public land with trees. So, that is something we are already doing, and I encourage the Member to encourage Departments to come back to us quickly, because the sooner they come back to us the sooner we can get on with the job of creating more woodland, which will be a great carbon sink.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you, Minister. Before the next questions, I ask Members to take their ease while there is a change of Chair.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Communities

Historical Sites: Protection

1. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister for Communities to outline her Department's responsibilities and legal standing in the protection of historical sites. (AQO 28/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I thank the Member for this important question. A society that understands the past is stronger for the future. Therefore, it is important to me that my Department helps communities to enjoy and realise the value of our historic environment. My Department's relevant powers and responsibilities are set out in two pieces of legislation: the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects Order 1995; and the Planning Act 2011.

Under the legislation, my Department has a duty to maintain 190 state care monuments and to facilitate access where possible. My Department is responsible for compiling a schedule of historic monuments, and there are currently approximately 2,000 scheduled. Scheduling provides additional protection through the requirement for scheduled monument consent before carrying out any alterations to these monuments.

My Department is responsible for drawing up a list of buildings of special architectural or historical interest. Currently, we have around 8,900 listed buildings. Making alterations without listed building consent is an offence. My Department must be consulted by planning authorities on applications that affect listed buildings and historic monuments, and also on draft local development plans. I will be engaging with councils in the time ahead around those local development plans as they progress.

My Department also has special powers regarding enforcement action for unregulated work to protected places and buildings and to fund activities relating to the historic environment. In the use of its powers, my Department seeks to work closely with relevant communities and stakeholders to ensure that we strive to hand down to the next generation the rich heritage we have inherited.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Minister, for a comprehensive answer. I ask you to please bear with me on this one. Knock Iveagh is a regionally important prehistoric burial site just outside Rathfriland that dates back to 3500 BC. It was later used as an inauguration site for early medieval Irish kings and is scheduled for protection under the

Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects Order 1995.

Since 2013, the historic environment division, which is one of yours, has failed to protect this site, allowing significant development to take place. If it were not for the Friends of Knock Iveagh, our heritage on that site would now be destroyed. Therefore, what action is the Minister going to take to fix the Government-sponsored vandalism of Knock Iveagh so that the ratepayers of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon are not left out of pocket due to her Department's failures?

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for your supplementary. I commend those organisations and campaign groups at a grassroots level that work to protect our heritage and environment. I am aware of the Knock Iveagh issue. In 2017, a telephone mast was erected. My Department consulted the council, and there was successful enforcement action. Obviously there are ongoing issues around the wind turbine, which was also erected in 2017. That was from a previous planning permission from the Department of the Environment at that time, dating back to 2013 and which my Department was not consulted on.

Obviously, since then, planning powers have been transferred to local authorities. I engaged with my Department this week, and it is keen. We have been having ongoing engagement with the local council looking at the issue and the planning that was granted, and I will continue to do that, while also liaising with the Department for Infrastructure around the impact that that is having on that historic site in the time ahead. I give a commitment to you. I am happy to sit down and engage with you and to meet with the community group to see if we can get a resolution in taking this matter forward.

Ms Armstrong: When I contacted officials in the Minister's Department while this place was not sitting, they stated that they did not have enough resources to adequately protect and take preventative action against owners of historic sites like Kircubbin harbour in my constituency to prevent them being destroyed through lack of upkeep. What action will the Minister take to resource her Department so that it can take legal action to require private owners to fulfil their responsibility to look after such sites?

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for your question. A number of funding streams have been in place since 2016, particularly around historic environments, and one is the historic environment fund. We provide funds of over £800,000 per year to look at those issues. Whilst I recognise that there are constraints, some of that is because of austerity and the impact on budgets in my Department. Just under £300 million has been taken out of the Department over the last five years. There is a broader conversation to have in the Executive, looking at the block grant and the impact of austerity. I give a commitment that I am looking at all of those in the budget-setting process going forward, ensuring that we have the necessary resources in place but also ensuring that those most in need are prioritised. If there are specifics that you would like to raise with me, I am more than happy to meet and provide follow-up information.

Mr Speaker: Questions 7 and 12 have been withdrawn.

Universal Credit: Waiting Times

2. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the average waiting time for an initial universal credit payment. (AQO 29/17-22)

Ms Hargey: This is a crucial area, and, obviously, since I came into post three weeks ago, it has been high up on my agenda. Members of this Chamber have raised concerns, and also groups who work at the coalface of this issue. Thank you for raising the question. It is a serious problem for people who are claiming universal credit for the first time.

When the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was here a few weeks ago when the institutions were re-established, I made it clear to him that welfare reform was hurting many of our people, and particularly the most vulnerable in our society. I reiterated to the Prime Minister that austerity and the attack of welfare changes was punishing poor people for being poor. I think that that is playing out, and not just here; we are also looking at the consequences of that approach in England, Scotland and Wales, where the poorest people are suffering.

Each week, approximately 860 new claimants for universal credit are due to receive their first payment, with 95% of those paid at the end of the first five-week period. Whilst I am pleased that my staff are able to make sure that most people get their first payment when it is due, I do not believe that it is right to make people wait that long in the first instance, so there is a critical factor that needs to be addressed. I believe that waiting five weeks for the first payment is wrong. It is clear that I need to state that. It also creates real hardship for families, forcing many into debt and having to use food banks. Again, we hear those stories on a daily basis.

Ultimately, I want to deliver a welfare system that is compassionate, and that sits with the New Decade, New Approach deal, where we are saying that we want to have politics that is different, is compassionate and protects the most vulnerable, and a system that is based on objective need to ensure that those who need it get it. My approach is to embed a human rights-based approach in the Department when looking at issues of social security and dignity. I have engaged with a number of welfare groups and campaigners over the past couple of weeks, and among the key points that were raised was the way in which people's dignity is stripped from them when they go through these processes and the impact of universal credit. That is something that we need to deal with collectively.

A range of flexibilities and mitigations that were agreed by the previous Executive are helping to offset some of the worst aspects of welfare reform here. One of those is the universal credit contingency fund, which is unique to here. Other places, such as England and Wales, are looking at the mitigations that we were able to secure, because they are having an impact, albeit they do not go far enough.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to wind-up her remarks.

Ms Hargey: The fund is available to anyone who is making a claim for universal credit and is experiencing hardship, and, to date, it has paid out over £1.5 million and impacted on 7,500 lives.

There are serious issues with universal credit. I have given a commitment to the Human Rights Commission;

Professor Eileen Evason, who led on the first round of mitigations; and the Cliff Edge Coalition that I will look seriously at the issue in the time ahead. I also want to engage with Members to look at what further progress and mitigations we can make as we move forward.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members and the Minister that there is a time limit for contributions.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Minister for her very detailed answer. As she knows, the delays often extend to three months, which, in some cases, on top of all their other financial pressures, can see clients facing eviction from their homes. What does she plan to do to streamline the process? Will she implement a repayment plan for those who have availed themselves of an advance payment? The entire repayment of that loan is being taken from the client's initial universal credit payment and that often results in extended hardship and means that it takes clients longer to stabilise their finances. Will the Minister consider implementing a repayment plan?

Ms Hargey: Yes, those are the issues that I will be looking at over the coming weeks. Obviously, there are repayments up to 12 months for the advance payments and they can be extended to 15 months under exceptional circumstances. From October 2021, that will extend to 16 months, but we can do more. I will engage with the grassroots who have been impacted by this to look at what the Department can do to set protections and look at changes that we can make. I commit to doing that and I will announce plans in the coming weeks on how I will take that forward.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far and congratulate her on her post, as I have not addressed her since she took office. The Minister in her first answer mentioned, among other things, food banks. Since some parties here voted to introduce welfare reform and universal credit, how many food banks have opened here and how many people have been forced to access them for vital support?

Ms Hargey: I do not have the exact numbers on food banks, but I can follow that up. As I touched on earlier, the welfare agenda and making cuts was ideologically driven by the Tory Government. We do not have our own fiscal powers and we are reliant on a block grant. People will remember that, back in 2016, when this issue was on the agenda, threats to the block grant were made and penalties imposed on a regular basis because there was no agreement.

We have the mitigations in place. I made an announcement today, which I will speak to in answer to another question, on extending those mitigations. I will also be engaging with food banks to find out the intelligence from the people who access those services. What more can we do to protect people? Are there further mitigations that we can look at? Are there fundamental changes to the welfare and social security system that we need to make? This is about protecting the most vulnerable and prioritising those who are in greatest need and that is something that I will lay out in the time ahead. Importantly, I will be engaging with those in the sector on the ground who are working with and talking to the people who have been directly impacted.

3.45 pm

Mr Allen: I am sure that we, as constituency MLAs, have all seen the impact of welfare reform and universal credit right across our respective constituencies. Is the Minister confident that the IT infrastructure for universal credit is suitably efficient to deal with the number of claims coming through? Will it be able to deal with the capacity of claims when universal credit is fully rolled out across Northern Ireland in respect of new claimants and those on legacy benefits?

Ms Hargey: Thank you for your question. This is an issue that I first raised when I went in to the Department. Obviously, we have not seen the full roll-out of universal credit. We have been looking closely at the pilot in England. We need to ensure that we have the IT systems in place, particularly where we want to mitigate and protect against the worst excesses of the austerity agenda. I have asked officials to look at what additional measures we need to bring in and to ensure that those are costed. I will provide that information in the time ahead. I know, from the questions that he has sent me, that the Member has a keen interest in that. I am more than happy to sit down with you, as I move forward with new proposals, to seek your advice and recommendations and to hear about the experiences of the claimants who come in to your office. I am keen to sit down and have a chat with you.

Ms Bailey: It is great to hear the Minister saying that she will make announcements in the near future about any potential changes that she can make to the awful process that we now have. She said that an announcement will be forthcoming, but does she have powers to make changes, for example, for people who make claims for universal credit and are suffering life-limiting or terminal diagnoses, such as cancer? I have been working for over two years with people who have been forced through the process, are still getting turned down and have to appeal the decision. Does she have the power to, for example, not force that on those people any more?

Ms Hargey: Thank you for your question. I will have a meeting this week with a number of people who have been impacted by the cruel policy of the six-month rule. It is something that I will look at in the time ahead. Obviously, all of that is subject to budgets, because we do not get the additional money through the block grant. I will look at further mitigations to protect the most vulnerable. I will outline my plans, but, importantly, I will look at co-design with the community and voluntary sector and the advice sector and also those who have been directly impacted: the people on the ground who receive those social security protections. I want to listen to them in the time ahead and consider what else we can do. It is not always a financial solution. Obviously, money is one part of it, but we could make fundamental changes to the system to make it easier for people to access and receive the support when they need it. I will look at that issue in the coming weeks.

Social Clauses

3. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Communities whether social clauses will be included in all capital contracts to ensure social value for the beneficiaries of departmental investment. (AQO 30/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for her question. The Executive policy of integrating social considerations

into contracts defines public-sector commitments to incorporate social clauses into public procurement. The buy social model has been operated by the strategic investment board since 2016 and has proven to be an effective means of providing targeted recruitment and training opportunities for long-term unemployed people, apprentices and students. Social clauses are intended to provide genuine, sustainable training and employment opportunities and are not to be seen as a source of low-cost labour.

I am committed to the promotion of the buy social model to incorporate social clauses into construction and services contracts according to the relevant thresholds as set out in the procurement guidance. I will also do other work cross-departmentally around a social value Act, which is an important piece of work. I have experience from working in local government of looking at local government strategies around inclusive growth. It is a critical point as we move forward that contracts cannot be looked at just in terms of low cost. We need to look at the impact that they have on social value and on targeting objective need, and also at issues around how we change the culture and use public procurement and contracts to do that on issues such as a living wage, where we mark up those employers who are living wage employers to try to create a more just economic model and system.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her response. We all recognise the immense benefit of local and social clauses. I welcome the fact that she is working cross-departmentally on a social value Act. Will she ensure that the Department follows international best practice to maximise the impact of social clauses?

Ms Hargey: Yes, I will look at those best practices and take them forward in the time ahead.

Ms P Bradley: We have had social clauses under various Ministers in what was DSD over many years, and those social clauses, on many occasions, were not fit for purpose and did not have the real value that was intended. In going forward, will the Minister talk to the Minister for the Economy to look at those skills and trades, which will help our communities not only in the next few years but for many years to come to build capacity among those communities in those skills and trades?

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for making an important point. I have written to the Minister for the Economy to pick up on a number of those issues, so I hope that we will meet in the coming weeks. This is one of the issues around the skills and employability agenda that we will discuss in the time ahead, so hopefully we can move forward on those issues cross-departmentally.

Mr Stalford: I welcome the Minister to her place and wish her well. She and I both served on Belfast City Council, and she knows that the experience there with social clauses was not a universally positive one. People point to the skyline of Belfast and its expansion as a sign of the progress that we are making, and that is true. Does the Minister agree that it is essential that inner-city communities, such as the Markets, Sandy Row, Donegall Pass, the Village and Donegall Road, see the benefit of major government contracts and that it is not simply measured by extra buildings going up? Does she agree that social clauses, properly implemented, will be a useful

way of ensuring that those communities see the benefits of major infrastructure projects?

Ms Hargey: I agree wholeheartedly with the Member. Thank you for your question. It should be about the social value that is added and particularly about targeting objective need. I fully agree with that, and I will look closely at that in the time ahead.

Library Services

4. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact of restricted opening hours, as a result of budgetary constraints, on the delivery of library services. (AQO 31/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I acknowledge and appreciate the great work that Libraries NI delivers on behalf of my Department across a network that includes 96 libraries, 16 mobile libraries and a home-call service. Libraries NI contributes to well-being right across the community through its health, education and other extended programmes. Unfortunately, due to continued budget cuts over previous years, not all libraries provided late-night opening over the summer period in July and August, some smaller libraries closed for a week during the summer period, 14 larger libraries reduced their opening hours over the Christmas period from 23 December until 31 December, and the remaining 82 libraries closed over the Christmas period from 23 December to 1 January inclusive. In all cases, Libraries NI has tried to minimise the impact on services to those local communities.

Recent innovations include the introduction of Lego clubs in the majority of libraries to encourage a wide range of users, such as fathers and their children. This initiative aims to promote social engagement, help to deliver motor skills, improve communication skills and nurture individuals' self-esteem through collaboration and creative thinking. Other programmes being delivered include rhythm and rhyme sessions for parents and children in every library, knit and natter and tea and newspaper activities, which promote social inclusion, particularly for older people.

Libraries NI also offers support for people seeking employment to find jobs, to prepare curricula vitae and to make online applications through internet access and Wi-Fi, which are both offered free to the public. While I appreciate that, due to budget cuts, some libraries have reduced their opening hours, they continue to deliver real valuable services across the whole community, and I am keen to engage in this area in the time ahead.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her response. I very much appreciate the great service that Libraries NI provides, despite challenging finances. I also welcome the cross-departmental work to provide the pilot out-of-hours service, particularly in Saintfield in my constituency.

Will the Minister give an update on the much-anticipated and long-overdue redevelopment of Newtownards library, please?

Ms Hargey: I do not have that information. I have asked for a breakdown of all the current library programmes. I will follow up that question to you in writing.

Welfare Reform

5. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on welfare reform mitigations. (AQO 32/17-22)

Ms Hargey: From the outset, I should state that as an individual, an MLA and, indeed, a Minister, I am opposed to austerity. That will come as no surprise to anyone. I also believe in compassion and human rights for all our people. Those things are embedded, not just in the Good Friday Agreement but in New Decade, New Approach. All the decisions that I make will be based on objective evidence and need. Therefore, I welcome the question, which provides me with the opportunity to set out my stall.

This morning, I announced that the Executive have agreed to my recommendation, in line with New Decade, New Approach, for the urgent extension of the bedroom tax mitigation beyond March 2020. The mitigation scheme provides financial support to people who would otherwise have lost out as a result of welfare cuts. That is an estimated 38,000 households or families that receive the supplementary payments that protect them from the bedroom tax.

In the coming weeks, I will introduce legislation to extend the essential mitigation, which will continue to safeguard more than 38,000 of the most vulnerable households in our society from the harsh welfare cuts that we have seen. The proposal will cost £23 million per annum. Aligned with that, over the coming weeks, I will bring forward regulations on the other strands of the existing welfare mitigations, such as the benefit cap and those transitioning from disability living allowance to the personal independence payment. The cost of that will be around £17.3 million per annum. However, other mitigations need to be looked at, and we need to review the mitigation measures that we committed to in New Decade, New Approach.

I will continue to liaise with stakeholders and work with them on co-design and on how we move this necessary work forward. I acknowledge and thank the organisations that I have met in the past few weeks. I have prioritised this area of work.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to conclude her remarks, please.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Human Rights Commission, Cliff Edge Coalition and Advice NI, to name but a few.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she ensure that the advice sector is adequately resourced so that those who are dependent on welfare benefits will receive their full entitlement?

Ms Hargey: I have asked that the regulations for the mitigation payments also continue the vital annual funding of the advice sector. It is critical that we have advice available for those in crisis.

I have to say that there are also skilled staff in the Department and in the local jobs and benefits offices. I encourage any Member who finds someone in need to access independent advice or to go through local jobs and benefits offices. I am keen to ensure that the resource for the advice sector is retained.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister's comments on social sector size criteria. It will be novel to see the party

opposite vote for regulations this time, because they left that responsibility to the House of Commons the last time.

Will the Minister give an assurance that the underspend, for at least the past two years, of £136 million for mitigation measures is still in place and is money that will be available? What will she do in the Department to ensure that there is no further drain on public finances and that the money that was allocated is used?

Ms Hargey: It is an area that I am looking at. The last round of mitigations that were secured played a vital role in protecting the most vulnerable. They were developed over a very short period, of around five weeks, and then introduced.

There were some elements of that that meant, when you looked at it, that the tax system would have taken some of that money if we had paid it out, so, in effect, it was not going to protect the most vulnerable. Announcements I will make in the coming weeks will be around working with the sector and with people who have been impacted, and any future mitigations we want to bring forward will be to really test what works well and develop mitigations that protect the most vulnerable and the larger number of people in our society. I will roll out my plans and my approach to that in the coming weeks.

4.00 pm

Mr Carroll: Given today's announcement that the bedroom tax mitigations will be extended, what does the Minister intend to do to help those who lost their supplementary payments when they moved to a house with the same number of rooms because it suited their outstanding needs — for example, people who had to move to a different accommodation to make sure it suited and could accommodate their disabilities? What will she do to ensure that people who have lost out on their supplementary payments will be supported?

Ms Hargey: Thanks for your question. This is a critical area and one that I was acutely aware of. I have closed that loophole in the system, and, therefore, any change of circumstances around moving will now be mitigated for in the new proposals going forward.

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

Benefit Fraud

T1. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister for Communities to explain why one of the first decisions she took upon becoming a Minister was to do away with the long-standing custom and practice of publishing the names of those legally convicted of benefit fraud in Northern Ireland. (AQT 21/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The first thing is that it has not been long-standing custom and practice; this was introduced again only in 2011. From 2007 up until that period, that custom and practice did not exist. Benefit fraud is a serious issue that my Department puts a large resource into, but names associated with benefit fraud are already published in the system that adjudicates on those issues — the court and criminal justice system — and that is where it should rest.

I have engaged with the rights sector over the last couple of weeks, and they feel that this creates an air of

demonisation of poor families. I wanted to ensure that we militate against that. When you look at the social security budget, you see that it is £6.1 billion and less than 1% of that is around benefit fraud. I want to focus more on the Make the Call campaign, where, in 2018-19, we secured £43.1 million of additional benefits that people were entitled to and had not claimed. We also want to look at issues of official errors and how we can reduce that, because, in the same year, the adjustments were £22.5 million, which, in many ways, outstripped the issue around benefit fraud. That is where my focus needs to be. I am about protecting the most vulnerable and ensuring that people get the access to the social security system that they should. That is notwithstanding the benefit fraud work that still goes on, but I do not see the need for me to publish that on my website. That is already done through the Court Service.

Mr Buckley: I recognise what the Minister said, but does she realise that this has left many law-abiding citizens asking this question, which I will put to the Minister now: where do the Minister and her Department stand on criminality and transparency?

Ms Hargey: I have set that out clearly: we have a resource that looks at issues of benefit fraud. There are prosecutions, and the figures stand for themselves. I will ask the Member a question back. You can start asking questions around NAMA and the property portfolio, where billions were wasted. When we look at tax avoiders, we see they are not listed on a system. We can start to look at all those issues. When you look at the money, you see that this is less than 1% of a £5.1 billion budget. It is an issue of proportionality, and I do not think it is proportionate to look at the most vulnerable. We need to look at those who, in terms of tax avoidance, have billions upon billions in offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands. That is where our focus should be, and it should be proportionate.

Benefit Fraud

T2. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Communities a similar question, with her indulgence, given that she outlined her rationale and reasoning for stopping the publication of the names of people who are convicted of benefit fraud, to elaborate, if possible, on when people are convicted of other types of fraud, how many times their names are published — once, twice, three or four times — particularly following convictions for theft of small amounts of money. (AQT 22/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have some of the figures on convictions for benefit fraud over the last number of years. It is a figure that has declined in recent years. In '16-17, 280; '17-18, 316 — there was a slight increase; and then '18-19, 191. I will get the rest of that information in written form and send it to you.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate the Minister's response. For the purposes of clarity, perhaps she could also try to get some figures on error. We often hear about fraud; we rarely hear about the errors in the system. In a previous question — I think Joanne Bunting asked it — we heard about errors in relation to universal credit and the impact that that has on people. It would be good to have those figures also.

Ms Hargey: On errors, recently the official adjustments figure was £22.5 million, so it is not a small budget. The

fraud figure is £56.2 million, but the figure for those who are not getting the benefits that they are entitled to is £43.1 million. My focus is on reducing the error but also ensuring that, through the Make the Call line, those who are entitled to unclaimed benefits actually receive them.

Sign Language Bill

T3. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Communities, after welcoming the use of the sign language interpreter in the Chamber, for an update on plans to introduce a sign language Bill. (AQT 23/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member who raised the issue of the signer and the Ceann Comhairle. It is good, and we should definitely use it in the time ahead. I am aware of the British and Irish sign language framework being put in place; work around that is ongoing. I am meeting departmental officials again this week to look at a timeline for that legislation. That will start to develop over the coming weeks and months. I will update the Committee and the Chamber once I have a more definitive timeline.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her positive response. It leads by good example. Will the Minister ensure that the entire Executive and all Departments are kept on board in any discussions as the Bill progresses to ensure that everybody across the board is bought into it?

Ms Hargey: Yes, I can give a commitment that I will do that.

Neighbourhood Renewal Budget

T4. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department is working to ensure that the neighbourhood renewal budget for the community and voluntary sector will be in place for this year to guarantee continuity of service. (AQT 24/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have had an initial meeting on the neighbourhood renewal programme budget. As someone who was previously employed under that programme and who lives in a community that is impacted by it, I see the amazing work that neighbourhood renewal partnerships do. Obviously, we are in the middle of budget-setting processes, but it is to ensure that the budget, as is, will not be reduced in any way. I will have to look at how we develop that programme in the time ahead and, importantly, at how the neighbourhood renewal programme beds into the anti-poverty strategy that I will bring to the Chamber.

Mr McCann: As the Minister is aware, for the past number of years, the community and voluntary sector has had to issue protected notices to its workforce because of uncertainty in budget allocation. Can the Minister assure us that that yearly disaster, which has a huge impact on the community infrastructure, will be dealt with urgently and that her Department will move to a three-year funding cycle as soon as possible?

Ms Hargey: Multi-annual budgeting is essential; I know that it is in New Decade, New Approach. There are, obviously, some system issues in moving to that agenda, but it makes sense. If you work in the most deprived communities trying to develop programmes, you cannot do that in 12 months. We need to give greater certainty and assurance to the projects that work at the coalface. I will look seriously at that in the time ahead and at the rights

of those employed in the community and voluntary sector, who have had issues with not getting a pay rise. There are other issues about workers' rights. I have already tasked my officials to compile a report on those issues and how I, as a Minister, can proactively address them, ensuring that workers' rights are at the heart of what we are trying to do.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

GAA Coverage on the BBC

T6. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister for Communities, on behalf of the 250,000 GAA members in Ulster, whether her Department intends to work with the BBC, the GAA and other stakeholders to tackle the inequalities that exist in the coverage of Gaelic games by the BBC, given that the Minister will be aware that, in 2018, she launched the Fair Play for Ulster Gaels campaign, which was borne out of the intense frustration from the GAA community across Ulster that the BBC, the broadcaster to which we all pay a licence fee, was not reflecting the popularity of Gaelic games in its TV and radio coverage. (AQT 26/17-22)

Ms Hargey: It is an issue that I am acutely aware of, and I am aware of the impact that the GAA, like other sports, has on our young people, communities and society as a whole. I will meet, as part of my portfolio, the BBC in the coming weeks, and it is one of the key issues that I will raise with them. I can come back and update the Member and the Chamber on that.

Ms Ennis: I appreciate that, Minister. I would like to bring to your attention — Members will be aware of this — the absurdity of geo-blocking, which we are all subject to in the North. Can I ask the Minister, alongside the Minister for the Economy, to look at that and, perhaps, work with RTE, the GAA and the BBC to tackle that issue?

Ms Hargey: I give a commitment that I will raise that.

Housing: Omagh

T7. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister for Communities to ensure that the housing waiting list and housing stress for Omagh has a town and rural dimension to ensure that rural dwellers are not overlooked. (AQT 27/17-22)

Ms Hargey: That is an area I will look at in the time ahead. I will set out my vision and approach on housing, whether the waiting list or the social housing programme. A key component will be that housing needs to be delivered on the basis of objective need in terms of where the greatest need is. The housing programme needs to be aligned to that. I have asked for a geographical breakdown of those statistics, and I will meet officials again this week and next as we firm up our housing approach and policy; indeed, I will engage with the Minister directly on the specifics of your area.

Ms C Kelly: I look forward to working with the Minister and, indeed, with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council to ensure that housing need is reflected throughout the local development plan process for that council area in the near future.

Ms Hargey: This is also a critical issue. I will engage with the 11 local authorities, particularly on the emergence of their local development plans, housing being a critical component. It is also highlighted in the New Decade, New Approach deal that we radically need to increase

the amount of public housing that we are making available. That has to be in the areas of greatest need. Local development plans need to be aligned with that, particularly looking at access to public land. It is my firm view that public land should be used for the greater public good, and one of the greatest public goods is the provision of housing. It is a basic, fundamental human right, and it will be a key focus for me and my Department in the time ahead.

Mr Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Emergency Housing Stock

T9. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to review emergency housing stock. (AQT 29/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I will look at that in terms of the access to and availability of emerging housing stock, along with key strands of housing work, allocations being another one. I know that we did not get to those questions, but I will set out in the coming weeks what my approach and vision will be in the time ahead. I will follow that up with you, and, once I make that announcement, there will be more information.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome that commitment. I am sure that the Minister would agree that, often, emergency accommodation is highly unsuitable for certain individuals. I think of young females with young children, vulnerable adults and people affected by domestic violence.

I welcome her commitment to look at the issue. Does she agree that hostel accommodation, in particular, can be very unsuitable for some individuals?

4.15 pm

Ms Hargey: It is definitely a critical area. I spoke at the Women's Aid conference last week about changing the conversations, and one of the critical areas was housing. Security of tenure, which is part of the allocations, and the points system are issues that I will be looking to address. Domestic violence is not listed as an area that is pointed out in that, so I am keen to review all of this. Supporting those with complex needs is important. At the Executive awayday a couple of weeks ago, with the Departments of Health and Justice, we agreed that we needed to work across the Executive to ensure that we are providing the support and resource to those who need it the most. That will be a priority for me.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. Members should take their ease momentarily, please.

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

Economy

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): On a personal level, I welcome the Minister back to the Chamber.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Renewable Heat

1. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline her approach to renewable heat in light of the

commitment in New Decade, New Approach to close the renewable heating incentive scheme and replace it with a scheme that will effectively cut carbon emissions. (AQO 42/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I ask for your indulgence, for a moment, to say that it is good to be back in the Northern Ireland Assembly. What a great privilege and yet a great responsibility to take on the Economy portfolio. I look forward to working with Members and, in particular, to working with the Chair, vice chair and the Committee as we try to take forward some very difficult and, at times, some very exciting issues in relation to the economy.

I thank the Member for his question. Closing the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme is a complex matter. There are cases before the courts. There are also state aid issues and other matters that need to be carefully thought through. My officials are preparing papers, outlining all the issues, that will be brought to the Executive as soon as possible. I am determined to find a way forward on RHI that is fair to participants who have acted in good faith but also to taxpayers who are funding the scheme. Work to bring forward a new renewable heating scheme will be taken forward as part of a new energy strategy for Northern Ireland. It is important that we get on with the decarbonising of heat as a way forward to meeting our net zero carbon target in 2050.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answer. I also want to congratulate her on her appointment. I am not going to congratulate her on losing her last job; we have lost great influence in Europe, in terms of our three MEPs, but that is a matter for another day.

On the RHI scheme and its closure, I accept that the Minister has research and paperwork to do, and, obviously, we await the outcome of the RHI report. Whatever replaces the RHI will have to protect the taxpayer, but it also has to be environmentally friendly, and serious concern has been raised that not only was RHI bad for public finances but it was not meeting its environmental targets.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for the question. In the Executive, we have set a fairly onerous target of zero carbon emissions by 2050. We are in a process, and there is a call for evidence on a new energy strategy for Northern Ireland. We are doing reasonably well in relation to electricity: about 45% of our electricity is generated from renewable sources. We are not doing so well in relation to heat. It is, therefore, really important that we find a fair and equitable way forward on this RHI scheme and also a renewable heat scheme for the future that commits us to our current targets but deals properly and appropriately with all the issues. I am determined that we will take our time to get the issues right and that there will be no repeat of the mistakes of the past.

Ms McLaughlin: I appreciate the complexity of closing down the RHI scheme, but has the Minister been able to communicate with the 1,200 businesses that are engaged with the project about imminent closure — or not imminent closure? They have to make other arrangements, and it is important that they are informed the whole way through the process of closure.

Mrs Dodds: For me personally, the answer is no. I have not engaged with those businesses. I am relatively new

in post, but let me set out some of the complexities and issues that will have to be dealt with as we move forward on the scheme.

Currently, there are two reviews of the scheme: a tariff review that arose out of the House of Commons Select Committee report and a hardship review. Those reviews are due to report reasonably soon, and I will share the information on their outcomes with the Committee for the Economy as soon as it is available to me. We also have a voluntary buyout option for current participants, which closed on 8 November 2019. I understand that there are 96 applications under assessment by the Department in relation to those participants, but no offers have yet been made. However, in taking the scheme forward, we will obviously have to consider their position in the overall context of what we do.

We have to deal with a number of complexities right now, as well as setting out a new way forward for renewable heat for the future. I look forward to doing that, and I know that my officials have engaged with scheme participants. I want to ensure that we engage with those participants in a fair and compassionate way that addresses the issues that we have experienced in the past.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the Minister to her new post. As a member of the Committee for the Economy, I look forward to working with her as we try to build the economy of Northern Ireland. Will she give us an assurance that the future of RHI will be fully considered and assessed and that existing tariffs are now under control?

Mrs Dodds: The outcome of the tariff review is due reasonably soon. The scheme has a current spend of around £7 million out of a budget of just over £28 million, so the actual spend of the scheme is under control. We need to look at the recommendations of the tariff report, and we will plot a new way forward when we have all the information that is available to us.

Mr Lunn: The New Approach deal — I forget the full title — identified the need for the rebuilding of trust and confidence in whatever scheme is brought forward. A big part of that would be, obviously, how we compensate the perfectly bona fide and legitimate recipients of the current scheme. Can you give us any idea of the amounts of money anticipated to be involved and of where that money may be coming from?

Mrs Dodds: At this stage, it is too soon to say how much the closure, or any potential closure, of the RHI scheme might cost. I intend to bring forward a paper when we have resolved all the issues and when we have the hardship review and the tariff review. I will do that in a transparent and open manner so that we can collectively consider how best to take the issue forward. I am positive, given the current financial situation, that the costs of any closure or any future scheme will be of the utmost importance and interest, not just to the House but to the Executive.

Mr Allister: I congratulate the Minister on escaping the European Parliament.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Allister: I will not go any further than that.

On the glib suggestion of closing the RHI scheme, does she accept that that will drive current participants back to

fossil fuels? Indeed, the reduction below an economic level of the current subsidy has driven many on to fossil fuels.

Secondly, does she recognise, particularly from two pieces of litigation in England — the former Department of Energy and Climate Change cases against Friends of the Earth and the Breyer Group — that a scheme cannot be closed without compensation? Therefore, there will be a cost to the public purse.

In regard to those matters, she said that there are two reports: the Cornwall Insight report and the Buglass report. Did I understand her correctly when she said that her Department has not received either? There certainly is an impression given that it has.

Mrs Dodds: I have not received the results of the hardship report or the tariff report. I understand that the tariff report is due imminently, in which case the outcomes will be shared with the Committee, and we will take them forward.

On your first point about fossil fuels, you are absolutely right: we need to be very careful that how we proceed going forward does not encourage further dependence on, or a return to, fossil fuels. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document indicated that closure of the scheme should be considered. I, along with my officials, will of course bring forward all the options for the scheme, and the Executive can then take an informed decision on how best to proceed. I am committed to helping us have a low-carbon economy in Northern Ireland. I have no desire to increase the use of fossil fuels. That is why I urge us all to get engaged with the energy strategy. There is a call for evidence to inform that strategy. It is very important that we develop a strategy for Northern Ireland that makes us competitive and as environmentally sustainable as possible.

Dr Aiken: I join others in welcoming the Minister to the post. I have just one issue. How many RHI boiler installations have been inspected to date, and how many have been found to be compliant?

Mrs Dodds: I anticipated your question: to date, almost 600 sites on the scheme have been inspected. It is hoped that 880 sites will have been inspected by the end of June and that the remaining ones will be done by the end of the year. The inspections are complex. When the whole scheme is done, there will be a full picture on the issue of compliance. There is some information available on that. I will ask my officials to brief the Committee on compliance and on the inspections done to date.

4.30 pm

Brexit: Import/Export Position

2. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for the Economy, following the withdrawal from the European Union, whether she will clarify the position of those businesses locally engaging in import and export. (AQO 43/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for your question. The protocol in the withdrawal agreement will set the terms for our trade in goods. Many issues important to that trade, where businesses will want clarity, are not devolved. Issues like unfettered access to the UK market, the treatment of goods entering Northern Ireland from GB, access to labour and access to UK trade agreements are all the responsibility of the national Government. It will be the UK

Government and the EU that will agree how the protocol will be practically implemented. The UK Government, however, have committed to including the Executive on the UK delegation for the joint committee, and I will be working with colleagues to make sure that we maximise our influence on that forum. I have already taken part in the United Kingdom trade forum with Minister Conor Burns and counterparts from Wales and Scotland. That will be hugely important in ensuring that we have full access to UK trade deals, as promised by Prime Minister Johnson. Last Monday, I met Michel Barnier here, in Northern Ireland, and, of course, I met him in the European Parliament in the middle of the week. Again, I raised those issues of how we treat goods coming into Northern Ireland.

This is an issue of the absolute, utmost importance. It is imperative we work together to make sure these issues are dealt with in the coming months, and there is very little time to work on them. Let me assure you that I will be working with the wider business community, the Committee and Ministers to ensure that Northern Ireland's case is forcefully represented and its interests protected as we go forward in this transition period.

Ms Sheerin: I am thinking specifically of some firms involved in parallel importation, so they import a product into the North from an EU state, repackage it here and export it for trade in the Twenty-six Counties, which is, obviously, another EU state. I am wondering about this, because I know of a firm in my constituency that is worried at the minute and does not know how to prepare for the future. When will they receive detailed guidance? Will the Minister's Department be offering that?

Mrs Dodds: If the Member writes to me with the specifics of that case, I will, of course, be very happy to have officials look at it and see how we can make progress. I understand that one of the greatest things for businesses going forward is to have certainty about how they do business, the manner in which they do business and the forms and processes etc they have to go through to do that business. So, I will be very happy to respond individually.

As an aside to your question, it was interesting to see this morning that the Prime Minister and the European Commission set out their opening positions on negotiations on the future economic relationship between the UK and the EU. Clearly, that was set out for a negotiation purpose. There are key issues for us that will be very, very important going forward. Again, it is absolutely important. This is the key issue for the Northern Ireland economy that we will need to deal with going forward. Unfortunately, because it is a negotiation, the situation can sometimes appear more fluid than businesses want.

Mr Stalford: I welcome the Minister to her place and give her every best wish going forward. We look forward to welcoming her to the Committee this week. As well as engaging with local businesses and giving them advice on import and export, one of the key priorities of her Department will be the promotion of exports from Northern Ireland. Can the Minister outline how she sees Invest NI tying in with that and what plans she has for a revised international strategy to encourage businesses in Northern Ireland to take advantages of the opportunities that Brexit will provide?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. It is hugely important that we recognise that. Sometimes

we talk of the difficulties, but Brexit will present new opportunities as well. By far the most important market for Northern Ireland is the GB market. Around 70% of everything that we make, grow or produce is sold within the United Kingdom. About two thirds of everything that we bring into Northern Ireland is from GB, whether it is for the marketplace or the high street. Securing access to those markets is the most important thing and is uppermost in my mind, so that the Prime Minister's promise of unfettered trade becomes a reality. The Prime Minister also promised us in his statements that we would have access to future UK trade deals. That is why, last week, I participated, alongside Conor Burns, Minister at the Department for International Trade and our counterparts from Scotland and Wales, on the issue of setting up a UK trade forum.

I want Northern Ireland to benefit from global Britain. I want Northern Ireland to be able to take part in those trade deals. As an aside, this week I am meeting a delegation from Qatar to strengthen trade relationships with that part of the world. There are many exciting opportunities going forward and we will work to maximise those, not just to protect Northern Ireland and GB, but to work on our global profile.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the Minister to her position. She has a busy period ahead of her. No independent economic forecaster has ever produced a credible forecast that shows an economic benefit, either to the United Kingdom or Northern Ireland, from leaving the European Union. I ask the Minister, as a matter of urgency, that she asks economists in her Department to provide robust economic analysis of the various scenarios that face Northern Ireland in the years ahead, including possible GB/NI east-west barriers. Can they produce independent economic analysis that she can bring before the Assembly that we can use to debate the best possible future for Northern Ireland and how we affect the negotiations she has talked about?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Undoubtedly, the Member takes a particular view of Brexit. However, Brexit for us in Northern Ireland is a fact: we have left the European Union. What we need to do is to work together to ensure that Northern Ireland maximises its potential in the years going forward, so that is absolutely my most important priority at this minute in time.

There are many economic analyses of where we might be in any particular scenario. Some of those have not worked out particularly well or even been that accurate in relation to the impact of Brexit. However, what we will do, when we see how the joint committee develops, how the negotiations develop and the exact nature of the trading relationship between the UK and the EU, is bring forward our own analysis and recommendations.

As an add-on, my own particular view of this is that we may have left the institutions of the European Union, but we have not left Europe. We will still continue to trade with Europe; we will still continue to work on security with Europe; we will still continue to work on the really important issues, such as human trafficking, and on many other items. It is absolutely important that we move ahead, maximise our potential and grow Northern Ireland's economy.

Mr Stewart: I, too, congratulate the Minister on her new role and look forward to working with her on the Economy Committee. The Minister will be aware of the comment over the weekend from Stena about its concerns about limitations at the ports here in Northern Ireland. Is it likely

that extra space for checking goods will be required at ports in Northern Ireland? What discussions has the Minister had with port operators on those matters?

Mrs Dodds: In deciding what we need to do in Northern Ireland, we will need to see the outworking of the protocol. The Prime Minister has promised us unfettered access. The Executive need to hold the Prime Minister to his word and let us see what unfettered access means. I understand that ports see both restriction and opportunity in the situation that we are currently in, and I will be talking to them in the future to ascertain their exact needs.

Reval2020

3. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will engage with the hospitality sector on the impact of Reval2020, the revaluation of business rates. (AQO 44/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. The tourism and hospitality sector has experienced steady growth since 2013 and plays an important role in the Northern Ireland economy. In 2018, there were an estimated five million overnight trips in Northern Ireland. Estimated expenditure associated with those trips was a record-breaking £968 million. As Minister with responsibility for tourism, I am aware of the potential impact of the proposed rates revaluation on the sector. It is my intention to meet with a number of key stakeholders from the sector to discuss a range of issues impacting the tourism and hospitality business.

Ms Bunting: The Minister mentioned the very real fears in hospitality that the result of Reval2020 may be that hard-won growth is smothered and, in some cases, some businesses may be forced to close. Will she undertake to make representations to the Minister of Finance on behalf of the sector to see what might be done to avoid and/or minimise such an outcome?

Mrs Dodds: I can confirm that I have a meeting with the Minister of Finance later this week, and we will no doubt discuss those issues.

Mr Blair: Like others, I congratulate the Minister on her appointment and wish her very well for the times ahead. Does the Minister, on behalf of the hospitality sector, support reform of licensing legislation in Northern Ireland? In addition, is she likely to report soon on a recent review of that legislation?

Mrs Dodds: My understanding is that that is an issue for the Department for Communities, but I will be happy to give a view. I want the sector to develop and to grow Northern Ireland. The sector is responsible for around 65,000 jobs in Northern Ireland. It is important that we support the sector and allow it to grow in the best way possible. The Department for Communities is the Department in relation to the licensing issue.

Mr Catney: I also welcome you to your post, Minister. I was engaged in the hospitality sector all my working life and I can tell you now that there is real fear out there. I ask you to engage with that sector in order to look at a fair, level playing field. I feel that it has been really hard done by. Taking on board what I have already said, will the Minister engage, as a matter of urgency, with the Minister of Finance and the Executive in the development of a

new and innovative business rating system that is fit for purpose in our modern economy?

Mrs Dodds: I will of course engage on this particular issue. I understand the hardship that, sometimes, that can bring, particularly to small businesses that are impacted, from my Department as well as the hospitality sector. I will engage with the Minister of Finance and I suspect that the Minister of Finance will get a significant number of questions around this particular issue.

4.45 pm

Zero-hour Contracts

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline a time frame to ban zero-hour contracts, as set out in New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 45/17-22)

12. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how she will progress the workers' rights commitments in New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 53/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I would like to answer AQO 45/17-22 and AQO 53/17-22 together, as they are on a similar issue.

I am committed to protecting vulnerable workers, especially those whose only choice is to accept zero-hour contracts, which do not guarantee any hours and prevent them from working elsewhere. That seems somewhat unfair, particularly to those whose options are limited in relation to the times and hours that they are able to work. My officials are going to develop policy options, taking into account best practice, and we will provide advice in due course. I am also sure that the Committee will take a particular view on the issue in the fullness of time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Just for clarity: you are grouping questions 4 and 12, and 5 and 13, Minister. I think that that is the case.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answer and wish her well in her new post. Will she ensure that she engages with the key sectors to ensure that the process rolls out smoothly and that there is a better understanding of it?

Mrs Dodds: I assure Members that I will engage with key sectors and will try to understand, in bringing forward options and potentially even legislation, how these things impact on families and lives — on real people in our communities — in the fullness of time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We now move to topical questions.

Post-Brexit Support

T1. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will provide financial assistance to firms that find that they need massive adaptations to their business model to continue trading post leaving the EU. (AQT 31/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. In the New Decade, New Approach deal, it was indicated that there should be compensation for firms in relation to the costs associated with the implementation of any new systems. I intend to take that forward with colleagues. The first meeting of the Brexit subcommittee of the Executive

will be tomorrow morning and this issue will be part of the considerations in the overall package. It is important that the Government live up to their commitments in the New Decade, New Approach deal and look after businesses in Northern Ireland that might have to change their way of operating.

Ms Sheerin: I welcome the Minister's commitment and thank her for that. I am concerned about some firms that are looking at a potential move to the Twenty-six Counties as opposed to retaining their business in the North. Where a firm finds itself looking at a move south as being its only viable option, will there be financial assistance to try and maintain the jobs that they are providing at their base in the North?

Mrs Dodds: All of the issues will have to be looked at individually. We can direct that to the appropriate Department or to Invest Northern Ireland for them to have a look at it, if the Member would like to contact me directly.

Parental Bereavement Leave

T2. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for the Economy, after congratulating her on her appointment, whether parental bereavement leave is to be introduced in Northern Ireland. (AQT 32/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. In April this year, it is anticipated that a new arrangement will be brought in in the rest of the United Kingdom around the issue of parental leave. It will mean that bereaved parents who are employees will be entitled to two weeks' leave following the loss of a child under the age of 18 or a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy. Employees with 26 weeks' continuous service will be entitled to receive statutory pay while absent from work — I think that that equates to around £151.20 per week in 2021.

At present, there is no corresponding legislation in Northern Ireland. However, it is my intention that parental bereavement leave will be introduced here, and I have asked officials to bring forward proposals for my consideration as a matter of urgency. That is the right and proper thing to do. Currently, the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 gives a day-one right for an employee to have a reasonable time off work to deal with an emergency such as a bereavement involving a dependant. An employer does not have to pay an employee for that time away from work, but many employers already offer paid special or compassionate leave. As Minister, I encourage employers to continue to ensure that their employees are treated with compassion. Statutory parental bereavement leave introduced in Northern Ireland would ensure that all employees are able to avail themselves of parental bereavement leave should they find themselves in the difficult circumstance of the loss of a child.

Mr Robinson: I am sure that the Minister agrees that, at such a traumatic and difficult time for parents and families, parental bereavement leave would provide much-needed time for parents to grieve for their loved one and sort out domestic problems for the bereaved family.

Mrs Dodds: Absolutely. When it was first brought to my attention, I could not believe that, in this day and age, we did not have statutory provision on this issue. It is the right thing to do. I know that I will have support across

the House in relation to that. Employment law should be fair to employees and employers, but it also needs to be compassionate. I will bring that forward as soon as I can.

Economic Strategy

T3. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for the Economy what action she intends to take to ensure that, as referenced at annexe 4 of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, there will be an economic strategy, and to state how that will relate to all our constituencies and all our communities, particularly our rural communities, which do not get a mention at all in the agreement. (AQT 33/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely am committed to bringing forward a new strategy for Northern Ireland. I want a dynamic economy that brings benefit and prosperity to all our people in Northern Ireland. That is of the utmost importance. As someone who, in the European Parliament, took a very keen interest in our rural communities, I want to ensure that that dynamic is extended into all rural communities. I reviewed Project Stratum, which aims to deliver broadband to communities where there are slow broadband speeds and poor connectivity, with officials in the Department. Of that delivery, 90% will be in rural areas, which shows the commitment that we have to increasing and growing the economy in rural areas of Northern Ireland as well as increasing productivity, which is absolutely key.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for that answer. In addition to the point made, can I be assured that the economic strategy, as it evolves, will link to other strategies in other Departments so that matters like infrastructure, education and other social issues in the Department for Communities are considered as well?

Mrs Dodds: We are in danger of consensus breaking out across the House. Yes, any economic strategy has to relate to all communities in whatever way they are found, and that is very important.

I will mention two key pieces of work that my Department will be bringing forward in the next number of months. One is a strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds in education, skills and training. It is absolutely important that the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy, which has responsibility for further and higher education, work together to deliver valid pathways for all our young people.

I am also currently reviewing work on the training programmes that will be delivered by the Department. I assure the Member of my commitment to all communities in that particular area, because I want to ensure that we have education at community level, whether that be traineeships or general education, that is driven by the community so that everyone can participate in the programmes and thereby find themselves better placed on the ladder of work.

Southern Regional College: Armagh Campus

T4. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for the Economy, after congratulating her on her new post and her first Question Time, for an update on the progress towards the opening of the new SRC Armagh campus. (AQT 34/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am absolutely delighted that my Department has a capital spend of over £200 million for new facilities for further education in Northern Ireland. Two Fridays ago, I visited the campus at Banbridge in Upper Bann, and it is very exciting to see there a new hub for digital learning that will be taken forward. It will open in September. The Armagh campus is due to open this year as well. Those are hugely exciting prospects to improve education, training and skills for our young people and to match those skills, with the help of employers, to our economy's needs.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she will agree with me that it is important that our young people get the best possible education and training as they face a competitive world in a modern economy.

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely do. To add to that, we need to ensure not only that formal education, community education, further education and higher education are linked but that they are driven by the needs of the economy so that we are training young people for real jobs while we seek out better remunerated jobs in the economy. Therefore, it is really important that we lay the foundation blocks. As an old teacher in another life, which seems a very long time ago now, I know that education is absolutely fundamental to progress for our young people.

Skills for Life and Work

T5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for the Economy, after congratulating her on her post and welcoming her to the Dispatch Box, for her view on traineeship and skills for life and work. (AQT 35/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. As I said in answer to an earlier question, that is something that I have been reviewing with officials in my Department. There is some concern about the progression levels from level 1 to level 2, about how those skills can be delivered and about whether they can be delivered in community settings. I hope to bring forward proposals that are flexible and that allow people to progress at the pace at which and in the place in which they are best placed to make that progress. The Member and I have visited and been part of community training schemes such as Impact on the Shankill for a very long time. Such schemes do an enormous amount of work with young people in the area, and I congratulate them on that work.

I look forward to working with them and, indeed, visiting some of them in the near future.

5.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time for a quick supplementary question, Mr Humphrey.

Mr Humphrey: It is funny you mention that, Minister. *[Laughter.]* Having met the management of Impact Training recently, along with senior officials from your Department, I take this opportunity to express my concern, as they are concerned, about some proposals that may emanate from your Department. I, therefore, take the opportunity to welcome you to visit Impact Training as my guest in the near distant future.

Mrs Dodds: I would be absolutely delighted to visit Impact Training. I would be going to my political home, and I would be delighted to do that.

I thank all my colleagues across the Chamber for their kind words on this, my very first Question Time.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes topical questions. Members should take their ease while we change the Chair.

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

Private Members' Business

Autism Training in Schools

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the specific needs of pupils with autism in our schools; values and supports the role of all educators in ensuring pupils with autism have the best educational outcomes; and calls on the Minister of Education to explore the introduction of mandatory autism training for all teachers and classroom assistants. — [Mrs Cameron.]

Which amendments were:

No 1: Leave out all after "Education" and insert:

"to introduce mandatory autism training for all trainee teachers, teachers and classroom assistants." — [Miss Woods.]

No 2: At end insert:

", and for teacher training colleges to introduce a compulsory module that includes this training during the postgraduate certificate in education." — [Ms Mullan.]

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): At the outset of this conclusion to the debate, I thank all Members for their valuable contributions. I pay tribute, as others have, to the various groups that have been involved with autism. The contributions that we have had, perhaps, show the merits of all-party groups. Many Members have spoken with the background of having gone through the evidence in the all-party groups. Autism can be an emotive and significant subject, particularly for those families who have children with autism. It is clear we have seen a considerable consensus across the Chamber on the issue.

I will maybe start with the two amendments. They perhaps have nuances of difference, but the general direction of travel is the same for both. To that extent, therefore, at the start of my summing up, I am happy to indicate my support for either or both amendments and, indeed, the motion itself. I will not seek to divide the House on the nuances of difference between the two amendments.

The growth in recognition and diagnosis of autism has, as some Members highlighted, been a welcome development in recent years, but that has then created a need for more awareness and training. Ten years ago, the figure for those diagnosed with autism was around 1.2%. Today, it is 3.3%, and, as a number of Members indicated, that is the equivalent of about one child per class. That is because there has been a growing recognition of autism. I do not believe it is because there has been a particular change, in any form, of the condition. It is actually that, for many pupils who in previous years went undiagnosed, there is a much greater opportunity for that to be picked up.

When we look at the role of educational professionals, we can see that they are not qualified to make, or responsible for, the diagnosis of any child's medical issue, but it is important that they are informed by the child's experience, their views and their strengths and needs. Their role is to identify the impact on the child's learning experience and

participation within an inclusive educational system, and then, using that knowledge and those skills, they can adapt their practice to enable every child to fulfil their potential. We should always remember that every child is an individual and that their needs are always slightly different.

Provision of support for special education is based upon those individual needs, and specific support is required to meet the needs of the child. Those with special educational needs quite often have more than one type of need or difficulty, and therefore interventions are tailored to meet the specific needs of the individual child. For autism, special educational needs may include speech, language, communication, social interaction, behaviour and emotional and well-being challenges, and there is a direct responsibility on the Education Authority to ensure that training that it provides is equitable and balanced across a wide range of special educational needs.

I want to highlight three areas where there is pre-existing training. First of all, there is the autism advisory and intervention service that is provided by EA, which provides a wide range of autism spectrum disorder training on request. Through that intervention, last year, the latest figures that we have show that 4,023 teachers and school staff accessed training from that. A number of Members have made this clear during the debate, and it has been highlighted by the unions: that is a good service. Is it adequate in and of itself? No, I do not believe that it is, and that has been highlighted particularly by the Ulster Teachers' Union. That has been identified by the EA itself; it has identified the need for a more strategic development of regional training. Even the EA has accepted that what is there is not sufficient.

The Middletown Centre for Autism has been mentioned, and that is funded jointly by my Department and the Department of Education and Skills in the Republic of Ireland. I know that a number of Members have visited the Middletown centre, and I certainly encourage them to do so. It operates as a second-tier service to the EA to augment its autism training programme. It has built a reputation for excellence in the quality of its services, as confirmed by independent joint inspections in 2012 and 2016. Middletown provides a comprehensive range of online training and advisory services for educational professionals, parents, children and other allied health professionals. It is a one-stop shop to support children with autism in their education setting and, as was mentioned by a number of Members, it takes a holistic approach. The support that is available at home is also critical.

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McGrath: You mentioned other places. Do you recognise that the informal education sector — in other words, the Youth Service — can also provide an invaluable resource to help with the socialisation of young people with autism, and that there are some excellent examples out there? As part of today's debate, you could maybe bring back to the Department how some work within the Youth Service could be strengthened going forward.

Mr Weir: While we want to provide the best of services, that will quite often involve a cocktail of measures. It is not simply a one-off. The Member is right, and I know that a number of the Youth Service providers have, for instance, received excellent inspection reports, particularly

when dealing with the issues around autism. I certainly acknowledge that.

Middletown provides a fully integrated suite of services, including a cohesive transdisciplinary learning support and assessment service combined with research and training, alongside opportunities for family support. The latest figures show that, during the 12 years of its interventions, it has delivered training to over 33,000 professionals. Many educational professionals access the training through this, and they are free to access it. Provision of tailored special educational needs training specific to need, coupled with school-based support and an incremental approach to service delivery, has been the current model and is to ensure that knowledge and understanding gained from any training is fully integrated. Training programmes are largely focused on upskilling educational professionals, enhancing the capacity of educational institutions to support children with autism in their education setting and in the home, and providing parents with support.

One of the outcomes of the capacity-building project, which was established in response to the 2017 Northern Ireland Audit Office 'Special Educational Needs' report, is that training in special educational needs, including autism, for teachers and those studying is a key focus of the Learning Leaders oversight group, which is chaired by my Department and involves a range of stakeholders. The purpose of this is to provide strategic direction in design and development. That oversight group was established in March 2017, following publication of the report.

There are many special educational needs in our schools. It is important that we get balance but also have a focus on autism. Through identification, we have seen a rising number of children with SEN. There has been mention of the overall costs of around £280 million to the Education budget, which is the latest assessment. Obviously, we need to ensure that we get the best possible delivery for our young people and the best possible value for our money. So, we have to caveat this slightly on the basis of what resources are available.

Mr Durkan raised the issue of the Western Trust. The one thing I can give an assurance on is that my Department will not be handing back any money in terms of spend on children, particularly resource spend. We will often be going to the Finance Minister to look for more, but there will not be any underspend in the Department of Education.

Despite the pressures that are there, we can think imaginatively. We are looking at where we are with this. The capacity-building group perhaps provides a template to look holistically at both CPD and initial teacher education. We need to see a step change in what we provide for special educational needs. I hope to launch a consultation and framework for special educational needs in the spring. That will provide a coordinated approach to autism and other special educational needs. All these things are multi-agency and multi-departmental in their nature, and there has been criticism of some other Departments. The second progress report on the current autism strategy, which is being done by the Department of Health in conjunction with other Departments, is also due to launch soon.

Ultimately, the big issue is how we move on from here. There has been mention of initial teacher education. The point is well made that, if we are to embed what is there, the starting point is to ensure that teachers coming out in

the first place do so with this level of knowledge. I should put a little bit of a caveat in that because, ultimately, initial teacher education is paid for by the Department for the Economy. I cannot make a pledge that actually spends someone else's money. The curriculum is controlled by the higher education institutions themselves. While there has been some autism training available, there is a concern that its depth is not sufficient. We need to move to a situation where it is embedded in initial teacher education and then, in the wider context, ensure a roll-out of mandatory training.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing the intervention. I welcome him to his place at the dispatch box and wish him well as he carries on the work that he started before the institutions were suspended.

Minister, there had been talk of a new ASD behaviour unit to be located in north Belfast. That could not be progressed because of the collapse of the institutions. Having spoken to local principals and teachers, I ask the Minister to look at this as one of his priorities.

Mr Weir: I am happy to give the assurance that we will take a look at that. We need to make sure that we have the right network of facilities.

There is no hidden agenda to look to abolish any form of special schools. It is about getting balance.

All our teachers, in special and mainstream schools, have to be highly skilled in supporting pupils with autism to succeed, and it is important, therefore, that our educational professions are appropriately skilled. It is clear that, while what we have been doing up until now has made a valuable contribution, it is falling short of the mark, and we need to embed that level of knowledge within our professions.

5.15 pm

There are imaginative solutions that the proposer of the motion and others have come up with. We can see, for example, as part of the SEN framework, that there will be an opportunity, as we move ahead, to embed within the so-called Baker days some provision and a recommendation that they should use those days particularly for SEN training. That could provide a level of focus on autism.

There is a unity of spirit here. The issue, therefore, is a question not of whether but of how we do this. From that point of view, I am not doctrinaire as to precisely how we reach that end point, but it is clear, given the growing needs that we have in the greatly increased level of identification of autism and, therefore, the prevalence in mainstream and specialised schools, that we do need to deliver better.

I will be happy to work with others to ensure that there is access to adequate, appropriate training programmes in initial teacher education and in continuing professional development. That has to borrow heavily from the experience of parents and teachers. Sometimes, there is a tendency for the Assembly or Ministers to almost dictate from above. It is important, if we are to have something that is fit for purpose, that it learns from the experience of families and what works directly for teachers.

That is the commitment I give. We will ensure, then, that we move towards that system, which means, therefore, that the proper provision is made and proper awareness, recognition and training are put in place. I welcome the rest of the debate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much, Minister. I call upon Chris Lyttle to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 2.

Mr Lyttle: It is amendment No 1, Principal Deputy Speaker. No?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes. I beg your pardon.

Mr Lyttle: No problem. Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. It is a privilege for me to respond to this motion. To begin with, I would like to read into the record a contribution that I have received from a parent of a child with autism in relation to the debate. It reads:

"Dear Chris,

Please keep pushing for mandatory autism training for teachers.

My son was diagnosed with autism in June of P6, and a number of his teachers were unable to recognise indicators earlier. I don't think they believed my concerns because he is high-functioning. He was constantly punished for behaviour beyond his control. His confidence plummeted; he didn't want to go to school; his learning was affected. It was a dreadful year that could've been easier if people were trained, equipped and supported to respond.

Please keep pushing so that another family doesn't have to suffer the way we did. We had both to adjust to autism at home and fight for our son at school.

Because of his autism, and the pattern-based way in which he learns, if he didn't know an answer on his post-primary transfer academic selection papers, he couldn't move on to the next because a pattern had been broken. He had to withdraw from the academic selection process for his mental health, and his choices were instantly reduced.

Our son is bright and been diagnosed as high-functioning but that doesn't matter as academic selection processes appear to make no allowance for a child who thinks differently. Their minds aren't standardised but they are meant to fit into standardised tests. They can't, so they're rejected and they have no choice. It is a disgrace.

I torture myself by wondering would it have been different if staff had autism training, understanding and support."

Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to ensure that that contribution from a parent of a child with autism has been heard today. The motion tabled by Pam Cameron MLA, the chairperson of the all-party group on autism, gives the Assembly the opportunity to recognise the unacceptable challenges and the breach of rights that children and families living with autism in Northern Ireland face; to recognise that many children and families living with autism in Northern Ireland feel unsupported and, indeed, failed by our education, statementing and health systems; to recognise the failure to fully implement the Autism Act and the autism strategy; and to recognise the need to train and resource our valued teaching staff to identify and respond to the additional needs of many pupils in our schools.

That opportunity has been taken by MLAs today. They have identified the centrality of autism teacher training and support to early intervention. They have recognised that the timeline for action has been lengthy and delivery is needed now and that, in the absence of this provision, not only educational attainment but children's mental health and family finances are affected. They have also recognised that excellent resources exist, in the likes of the Middletown Centre for Autism, but that investment and mandated access is needed.

The motion tabled by Pam Cameron MLA, and the amendment tabled by Rachel Woods MLA and I, gives the Assembly the opportunity to support the widespread campaign calling on the Minister of Education to introduce mandatory autism training for all trainee teachers and teaching staff.

I ask Members to support the motion and amendment, and call on all Ministers with responsibility for implementing the Autism Act and strategy commitments to attend and brief the all-party Assembly group on autism as to how they will deliver on those commitments. Importantly, they should start with the training and resources needed by our teachers to deliver early intervention and educational opportunity for children with autism and additional needs in our community.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I remind the House that, as this is Catherine Kelly's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, it is the convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption.

Ms C Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The number of children diagnosed with autism has risen by 20% in the last 10 years here. Boys are four times more likely than girls to be diagnosed, and, even more alarming, the rate of autism in more deprived communities is 58% higher than the average. Resources should reflect the higher prevalence of need in more deprived communities and among boys, but mandatory autism training for all teachers and classroom assistants is a basic first step.

Autism is a developmental issue, and teachers are in the business of developing children's potential. From personal experience, having worked in Naiscoil na gCrann in Omagh, I must say that helping children to fulfil their potential is very rewarding, and I want to take a moment to recognise the amazing work carried out in my constituency of West Tyrone by teachers and others, and organisations such as the National Autistic Society, west branch, in Omagh, who have been working for many years with children with autism and their families. West Tyrone has a high proportion of children and young people, many living in lower income families, but we do very well in education. Barriers can be overcome, and potential can be developed. Our schools and teachers need proper support. We would not expect a plumber or electrician to do a proper job without the right set of tools. Give our teachers the right set of tools that allow them to understand the specific needs of children and young people with autism.

In addition, let us do something we often fail to do: let us listen to the children and young people themselves. I ask all Members to support amendment No 1 and to recognise the need for compulsory training for those in teacher-training colleges and undertaking a PGCE. We need to ensure a

proper foundation of support and education for our children and young people, teachers and classroom assistants.

I thank all those who contributed to the debate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Let me be the first to congratulate the Member on making her maiden speech. It is sometimes intimidating to stand for the first time to do that, so congratulations to the Member. I call Mr William Humphrey to make the winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Humphrey: I congratulate you on your elevation to the position of Principal Deputy Speaker. I wish you well in that new role.

I thank my colleague the Member for South Antrim Pam Brown for securing the debate and, indeed, for the agreement that she has managed to achieve across the House. That does not always happen on this issue, which is, of course, hugely important in Members' constituencies.

There has been a 62% increase in the number of school-age children diagnosed with autism in Northern Ireland in the past five years. Department of Health research reveals the prevalence of autism in the classroom. As other Members said, it affects at least one child in each classroom. Therefore, the Programme for Government needs to deal with the issues. There needs to be real adjustments made to support autistic children and, more importantly, to allow teachers to carry out those adjustments.

If teachers are trained and given the skills, and if strategies are implemented, children will achieve their full potential. No child with autism should miss out on a full and supportive education. That would be hugely impactful on our classrooms, on our society and, most importantly, on each individual child affected. The fact that one third of our children may be on a reduced timetable is totally unacceptable. Over 78% of those children are placed in mainstream education, and it is my view that all teaching staff in Northern Ireland should, over time, be trained.

Early intervention is more effective, more cost-effective and better for everyone involved. As with mental health, suicide and mental general well-being, a joined-up approach is required across Departments and with local government and government agencies.

I take the opportunity to thank all the principals, teachers and classroom assistants who work on autism in our schools across Northern Ireland day and daily. I have been dealing with a couple of cases recently in my office, where teachers are stressed to the max and principals do not know where to turn. We need to give clarity and certainty. We need to give those teachers the skills to allow them to carry out their roles and functions so that they can provide the education that those young people need and give them the classroom environment to allow not just them, as individuals, but their peers to have an education that will make a positive change to their life. Formalised training is needed, and we also need to provide protection for teachers and classroom assistants. As I said, that will positively enhance young people's education. Equity must be brought to the classroom through training for education professionals. Ulster's schoolchildren must have parity with those across the rest of the United Kingdom.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to some people who have been making a huge contribution, not just in the classroom but in the community. Like Mr Lyttle, I want to read into the record the name of a lady in my constituency.

Ashleigh Spence established Snowflakes, a group that is working with young people from across greater Belfast and outside the city boundaries. It is a group of parents that has come together to work with young people on the autistic spectrum. They have done fantastic work. Ashleigh wrote to me, knowing that the debate was happening today, and asked me to make a number of points.

First, she asks how the training be delivered and by whom. She makes the point that it should be no less than the training provided to parents once diagnosis is confirmed. The initial classes are delivered by various specialists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists etc. They cover the reasoning behind understanding and strategies to identify managed behaviours. The classes are delivered in three or four sessions. A one-day PowerPoint presentation is not going to be of any use to teachers or classroom assistants. She says that they need true understanding. I think that we would all agree with that.

She also asks how success will be measured. What impact will the training of teaching staff have on the allocation of additional classroom assistants and support for children in mainstream schooling? Will there be extra resource for schools to implement strategies learned via the training? If the teacher has the training and learns of a resource to help a child in a class — for example, a visual timetable, scheduling board or wobble cushion — will funds be available for teachers to purchase or obtain such items? All those issues are important. Extra resource is needed, and it is therefore important that we all take those issues on board.

I also pay tribute to that lady because she is also involved in my scout district, and I declare an interest as the president of North West Belfast District Scout Council. We have a scout group in our district that is specifically for young children who have ASD. This young lady works with that group, and she is doing valuable work. We need to support those people in the classroom.

5.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am really sorry —.

Mr Humphrey: We need to support those in the community who are working hard. I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is not my afternoon. It is all right.

Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that, if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the specific needs of pupils with autism in our schools; values and supports the role of all educators in ensuring pupils with autism have the best educational outcomes; and calls on the Minister of Education to introduce mandatory autism training for all trainee teachers, teachers and classroom assistants.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while there is a change at the top Table.

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

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I have received notification from Mrs Dolores Kelly, a member of the Business Committee, of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm, in case the next item goes beyond that, under Standing Order 10 (3A).

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 3 February 2020 be extended to no later than 9.00 pm. — [Mrs D Kelly.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The motion was agreed to, so the Assembly may sit until 9.00 pm, if necessary.

Private Members' Business

Climate Emergency

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Dr Caoimhe Archibald to move the motion.

Dr Archibald: I am delighted that we have the —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. The Member will resume her seat. Can you confirm that you are moving the motion?

Dr Archibald: Yes, I can confirm that I am moving the motion. I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that we are facing climate breakdown and a biodiversity crisis, which are impacting here and now, and will affect all aspects of our lives in coming years; declares a climate emergency; and calls upon the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Minister for the Economy to implement urgently the commitments as agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement to include reviewing the Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions in respect of the Paris Accord and the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100; developing a new energy strategy that will set ambitious targets and actions for a fair and just transition to a zero-carbon society; bringing forward a climate change Act to give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning; establishing an independent environmental protection agency to oversee this work and ensure targets are met; developing an economic strategy that will support clean and inclusive growth and create jobs as part of a green new deal; creating a plan to eliminate plastic pollution; and closing down the renewable heat incentive scheme and replacing it with a scheme that cuts carbon emissions effectively.

Dr Archibald: I am delighted —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. Please resume your seat; there is some protocol to go through. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. Three amendments were selected, but one has since been withdrawn. In accordance with convention, an extra 15 minutes has been allocated to the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposers of the amendments will have 10 minutes to move and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

I now call on Dr Archibald to open the debate on the motion.

Dr Archibald: Third time lucky. I am delighted that we have the opportunity to debate this important motion. I move the motion and will support amendment No 1. On that, I acknowledge colleagues Clare and Rachel in the Green Party. I am grateful that we were able to work together on this. It sends a positive message when we can collaborate cross-party on big important issues that will affect us all.

For many years, the science and evidence on the breakdown of our climate have been abundantly clear. The earth's temperature is rising, causing our polar ice sheets

to melt and collapse and our sea levels to rise, heat up and acidify. We are all witness to the increasing numbers of extreme weather events that cause greater human and ecological damage around the world. There is, perhaps, no more striking example of that than the bush fires in Australia. They have caused the deaths of hundreds of millions of precious and endangered animals whose species might never recover and devastated the land and plant life. We send our solidarity to those suffering the real and present consequences of climate breakdown in Australia and around the world where extreme weather events will not get the same media attention.

The scientific evidence is also crystal clear on the cause of global warming. Carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases pumped into our atmosphere are rapidly warming our planet. It is also clear that this is a direct result of industrialisation, endless economic expansion and resource consumption and other human behaviours. The rise in global temperatures between 2006 and 2015 was greater than in the 50 years between 1850 and 1900. Since the pre-industrial era, the earth has warmed by at least 1°. If we want to have any chance of a safe and stable climate future, we must halt that warming in its tracks. In 2020, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we have just 10 years to reduce our global carbon emissions by at least 50% to have any chance of limiting warming to 1.5°. That is our target: if we miss it and even succeed in limiting warming to 2°, that difference of 0.5° could change the world irrevocably. It would expose millions more people to heatstroke and desertification; it could displace millions more climate refugees, as sea levels rise further and food and other essential resources become more scarce. Sea levels will rise, with more flooding in vulnerable areas. That 0.5° will see our air more polluted, while our oceans warm further, destroying marine wildlife and coral reefs.

The essential point is this: we have no margin for error. Any error or lack of application or the slightest failure to recognise the emergency around us has profound human and wider implications. As legislators and those charged with protecting public safety, our natural environment, our biodiversity and our climate for future generations, we must move now with urgency — all of us. To do that, we need rapid and radical action to reduce our emissions. We all have an individual and moral responsibility to confront climate breakdown and the disfigurement of the natural world, but meeting the scale of that challenge will require systemic change and unprecedented government action. By declaring a climate emergency, we are telling the public and the world that we recognise the scale of policy change and cooperation needed to deliver radical and consistent climate action. We are saying, “We are ready to meet the challenge of limiting global warming to 1.5°”. The purpose of the motion is to ensure the Assembly and the Ministers responsible in the new Executive urgently implement the commitments on climate action and environment in ‘New Decade, New Approach’. However, to be clear, I do not believe that the actions listed should be or can be the sum total of our response to the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis; they are a starting point.

Detractors of the radical policy that we need to deliver across all Departments will deploy tired and exhausted excuses for inaction. They may ask, “Is this not too costly?”. To this we must say, “We cannot afford not to act”. The current unprecedented bush fires in Australia

are likely to result in a cost of tens of billions of pounds. The cost of dealing with extreme weather events and the negative impact on health, infrastructure, food security and our ecosystems is incalculable. Central banks around the world now recognise the systemic and unprecedented risk to the global economy and the financial system. Perhaps the most vocal of those actors is Mark Carney, former Governor of the Bank of England, who starkly warned the global financial industry:

“Those that fail to adapt will cease to exist.”

We have the choice of allowing total economic damage, or we can embrace the prospect of a just transition and roll out climate action in a way that protects vulnerable communities, improves resilience through afforestation, transforms our public services and improves human health. Moving towards a zero-carbon society, we must introduce secure high-skilled employment to harness the world-leading potential of our renewable energy resources. That can create clean energy to power communities, eliminate fuel poverty and save hundreds of millions of pounds on annual fossil fuel imports.

At the core of any economic strategy going forward must be a green new deal and the principles of a just transition. A green new deal will support other key commitments in ‘New Decade, New Approach’, including addressing regional imbalance. We now have the real opportunity to fundamentally change our economy, improve productivity and direct resources on the basis of demonstrable and objective need. That is the vision of a just transition in this part of our island: confronting climate change in a way that improves the quality of our lives and ensures that we live within our planetary boundaries. To that end, Sinn Féin wants to see the establishment of a just transition commission that will detail the economic and legislative changes needed to reach the IPCC 1.5° target, while protecting the lives and livelihoods of communities. We need to end dependence on fossil fuels and move towards renewable energy sources. Sinn Féin has called for a moratorium on the issuing of any new fossil-fuel licences on the island of Ireland, as well as a complete ban on fracking.

Here in the North, we have met and surpassed the 40% target for the production of electricity from renewable sources by 2020. We now need a strategy that will rapidly build on that progress with programmes to replace the renewable schemes that are no longer active. The renewables transition must also be supported by improving energy efficiency through an ambitious retrofitting programme and amending planning regulations to ensure carbon-neutral buildings.

5.45 pm

We want to see climate action legislation that places targets on a statutory footing and obligates Departments, public authorities and public bodies to put in place strategies to meet emission reduction targets. An independent environmental protection agency must ensure that those targets are met, provide support and advice and, where necessary, deliver enforcement. We need policy that will both encourage change by consumers and obligate corporations and big polluters to reduce their emissions and move towards renewable sources. The same is true in tackling pollution, waste and toxic

plastic waste, in particular, through an extended producer responsibility scheme.

All the actions outlined will be the initial steps in our response to the climate emergency. It is necessary that we take those steps immediately and with urgency. We also need to ensure that our actions are joined up and collaborative. We need to act on an all-island basis, as climate and environment recognise no borders. We need to continue to uphold and work to EU environment regulatory frameworks and contribute to wider targets.

In summing up, I thank all those who provided briefings for today's debate, including SONI, NIFDA, NIE, the Royal College of Nursing, RSPB and others. The range of those who provided briefings shows the cross-cutting nature of the impact of the climate emergency. I also thank the Assembly Research and Information Service for its briefing.

Finally, I pay tribute to activists across Ireland and, in particular, our young people who have joined the school strikes over the past year. They stand alongside activists around the world who have ensured that the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis will no longer be ignored. They have placed the emergency facing us at the heart of the political agenda, exactly where it needs to be. In their name, and for future generations, we cannot let them down. I commend the motion and amendment No 1 and hope for all-party support.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Miss Rachel Woods to move amendment No 1.

Miss Woods: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "crisis" and insert:

“declares a climate emergency; and calls on the Executive to fulfil the climate action and environmental commitments agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement by commencing, as a matter of urgency, a review of the Executive’s strategies to reduce carbon emissions in respect of the Paris Accord and the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100 and to ensure that targets are met; and further calls upon the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to begin immediately work to establish an independent environmental protection agency based on models of best practice that will be appointed within 12 months.”

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Miss Woods: Members do not need me to tell them that we have very little time to act on the twin crises of climate disruption and biodiversity loss. The UN scientific consensus is that we have 12 years to arrest carbon emissions. Meanwhile, another UN science body tells us that one million species are at risk of annihilation. Members do not need me to tell them that the climate is becoming increasingly chaotic, and Members do not need me to tell them that a collapse in biodiversity will be accompanied by the collapse of humanity.

Leading climate scientists have warned that there are less than a dozen years left for global warming to be kept at a maximum of 1.5 degrees, beyond which even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought,

floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people. I do not have time, during this debate today, to go into the double injustice that those who will be the worst and most affected, short and long term, are those in the global south; those who did not cause this but who are having to leave their land because it is uninhabitable; those who literally have to move to another island because their current home will be under water in a few years.

Given the magnitude of this issue and its severity, there is a role to play at every level of society and government, and it should be the top priority of this Government. Accelerating our pace of change is no simple task, and it will be a challenge for everyone at times of supposed austerity and cuts, but it is a challenge that we need to rise to. There is no app for this. There will not be a wholly technological solution to fix this issue. We must fix it at every level, from the home to the farm, to how we grow and consume our food, to how we travel, what we wear and up to our entire economic structure.

A crucial part of responding to the climate emergency is the decarbonisation of our economy; that is, the phased and planned transition beyond fossil fuels. What is needed is a transformational adaptation of our economy and society. We need to take a leadership role in bringing the importance of climate breakdown and energy transition to the forefront.

The motion as amended can give us five steps. First, we can declare a climate emergency, mobilising the resources and attentions that this deserves. The second recognises that we are actually in a climate and biodiversity crisis, leading to detailed action plans on how that can be managed. This needs to include the voices of and cooperation from everyone at every level. The third calls on the Executive to live up to the promises in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, crucially introducing a climate change Act as Northern Ireland still does not have one. The fourth reviews the Executive's strategies to reduce emissions in line with the Paris Accord and ensures that those targets are met. Finally, it calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to begin to work immediately to establish an independent environmental protection agency based on models of best practice. That agency should be appointed within 12 months as we desperately need it if we are to meet any of these commitments. We need legislation with teeth, and we need an agency that has teeth, is properly resourced and is able to respond and lead on matters, which is why we are calling for one to be introduced as a matter of urgency.

We have much to do to get up to speed on plastic pollution, marine waste, illegal dumping, air quality and air pollution, transport and long-term sustainable planning. We need to tackle our biodiversity crisis as part of a climate breakdown as the two are intertwined. Environmental and natural mitigations to climate change are available and should be utilised. Northern Ireland is on target to go beyond the goal of generating 40% of its electricity from renewable energy by 2020, yet levels of greenhouse gas emissions are increasing, and we have the highest levels of car use, air that is literally killing us and the highest levels of fuel poverty in the UK and Europe. As many Members know, 42% of households in Northern Ireland are in fuel poverty, which is a terrible blight on our society where people have to choose between heating and eating. We should all be ashamed of that figure. There is an answer, and that is why

we need a just transition beyond fossil fuels as that is the only legitimate way to respond to climate breakdown: a fundamental change to our system.

A just transition means that no one will be left behind. Governments must cooperate with trade unions, industry and local communities to ensure that good quality jobs are available to workers in the new low-carbon green economy. We can retrofit homes, street by street, and ensure that any new houses are of the best quality and are as efficient as they can be. We can train and upskill the labour market, and we have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in coordinating such moves. We have an opportunity to lead on quality rather than focusing on quantity.

A just transition strategy not only is recognised in the preamble to the Paris agreement but is growing as an inclusive, realistic and positive approach to tackling climate breakdown. In September last year, for example, a just transition commission was established in Scotland, and the Spanish Government have committed over €250 million to compensate, retrain and offer early retirement to displaced workers and their communities. All those could serve as possible models for Northern Ireland so that we can address climate breakdown and the various transformations in different sectors and areas of our lives connected to creating a low-carbon Northern Irish economy and society.

The just transition approach has been supported and promoted by trade unions, businesses, climate advocates and environmentalists as a way to ensure climate policies include economic and, especially, employment considerations and that any low-carbon transition prioritises jobs that are well paid, decent employment and in the new green economy. It proposes bringing together everyone in a social dialogue to formulate and drive the plans, policies and investments that are needed for a fast and fair transition to a low-carbon economy. The transition to a green economy will be an opportunity for more jobs, warmer homes and new businesses, and will therefore be a positive step as opposed to being something that we begrudgingly have to do.

There are many voices that urge us not to do anything too radical. Why spend money on cutting emissions when we are only a tiny part of a huge global economy? Let the others do the hard work, and we can follow later. Apart from the moral bankruptcy of that argument, if we do not invest in a low-carbon economy now, we will be left behind in pretty short order. With no carbon targets and poor environmental regulation on our businesses, we will all wake up one morning and realise that they can no longer compete in a green economy. That will not be their fault; it will be ours for failing to provide the leadership that is needed now. A very wise man once said that a roof should be fixed when it is sunny, not when it is raining. The time to act is now, not some time down the road when the costs of doing something about it are dire and the negative consequences of inaction are high. This is not a "keep calm and carry on" situation. It is no longer business as usual. We owe it to our citizens and our young people to act now by declaring an emergency and showing leadership and action. This issue is above party politics. It is far too serious.

I will finish with the words of one young person who has provided more leadership in the past year than all the

world's politicians together. In Davos last year, Greta Thunberg said:

"Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people, to give them hope. But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Mr William Irwin to move amendment No 2.

Mr Irwin: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after "years" and insert:

"notes that the 'New Decade New Approach' paper was tabled by HM Government, in conjunction, where relevant, with the Government of the Republic of Ireland and contained within appendix 2 a possible outline of a Programme for Government that listed a number of potential measures on the subject of climate change but which have not been agreed as a final Programme of Government by the parties within the Executive; and calls on the Executive to use an evidence-based approach to balance the demands of our growing population whilst ensuring the protection of our natural resources for future generations, as they work to construct a final Programme for Government."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Thank you, Mr Irwin. You will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and a further five minutes at the end in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak in the debate will have five minutes. The Assembly should note that amendment No 1 and amendment No 2 are mutually exclusive, so if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2.

Mr Irwin: I speak as a farmer and as someone who is fully committed, first, by my personal desire and motivation and, secondly, of course, by very strict environmental guidelines to be a custodian of the countryside. That is a role that I take very seriously. I am joined in that role by many thousands of other farmers across Northern Ireland who also farm the land and take great care of the environment. That work is of the utmost importance. It cannot be overstated from an environmental perspective. The work, which, as I said, is very tightly controlled and monitored, serves the very important purpose of protecting our ecosystems while also providing vital food to sustain our population in Northern Ireland and, through exports, populations across the UK and further afield.

I am not a climate alarmist, and I do not promote alarmism. I say that because I have seen, over many years, all types of different weather patterns, which have given benefit and concern in equal measure. The farmer will agree with me wholeheartedly on that. However, I do not dispute that industrialisation has given cause to an increase in disruptive weather patterns in the global context. In Northern Ireland, as we know, farming the land and relying heavily on weather systems instils in the farmer an acute understanding of the environment. Farmers know a great deal about the capabilities of the environment and, indeed, its resilience.

The motion leads with the statement that we are "facing climate breakdown". Everyone understands that, across

the world, there is a growing frequency of climate events that are causing great distress and concern and are upsetting the lives of people in a very serious way. We should all be concerned about that. I want to see the environment be protected in the strongest possible terms. However, I want to see everyone playing a part in that response in a measured and non-alarmist fashion. Consumerism is driving global industrialisation, so it is consumers and their habits that will, to a significant degree, dictate the pace of change.

Recent statistics on global emissions point a finger very firmly towards China and other nations with a high reliance on coal and fossil fuels. The UK, by contrast, currently contributes only 1%, owing to very proactive steps taken to reduce carbon emissions, and that is to be welcomed. However, it is somewhat negatively offset by the UK's high-import carbon footprint for goods that are bought in, for instance, from China.

Farmers have been leading the way on protecting the countryside. Financial margins for farmers are so tight and competitive that their farming operations must be managed on the strictest and most efficient terms. A few decades ago, thousands of farmers, each with their own sowing, fertilising and harvesting operations, used smaller vehicles and equipment and took many trips to complete a task. In 2020, we have a limited number of contracted services that use high-tech machinery and much more capable equipment that covers greater areas much more efficiently. Food products must meet the most rigid production standards, meaning that farmers cannot cut corners. Farmers are encouraged to make their farm as clean and traceable as possible. That, as I said, is bound by strict protocol. That type of responsibility and custodianship, if anything, needs to be replicated across other production sectors and, indeed, instilled in our general population.

I mentioned wider society needing to care for the environment. Take a look at our roadside verges. They are a disgrace, strewn with litter and Coke bottles. Our hedgerows are the same. Everything looks unsightly. That is certainly damaging our environment. Farmers are sick of litter being blown across their fields and causing risk to grazing animals. Hundreds of thousands of plastic bottles litter our roadsides, along with coffee cups and takeaway packaging.

Why is it acceptable for people to hurl their packaging into the verge and for our councils to spend heavily on removing this unsightly mess, costing ratepayers more and more each year? This is only one area, but it shows that responsibility is key to this debate.

6.00 pm

Impacting global emissions positively will, of course, take more positive action across the globe, but it will also take a very real effort by consumers to use resources much more wisely and make choices much more sustainably. The amendment I speak on takes a more measured, reasoned approach to dealing with what is truly a global problem, and it is important that the Assembly and Executive take actions that are very well assessed and thought out and balanced by protecting both our environment and the livelihoods of people in Northern Ireland.

The motion calls for Departments to simply rush ahead and implement actions "urgently". This is not how it should

be done. Actions should be well thought out and need to be sustainable. Proposals and policies need to be tailored to the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland. I do not support knee-jerk reactions, which will do more harm than good to the well-being of the economy of Northern Ireland in the here and now.

I fully support the need for the Executive and the Executive parties to agree a financial Programme for Government that can work effectively on measures that, as the amendment says, use an evidence-based approach that will continue to see our environment protected not only in the here and now but for future generations. As I said, I speak as someone who has endeavoured to care for the environment for decades, and I want to see —

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member outlined the issues he has with the language in the motion, and I will bring to his attention some issues that some of us might have with the language in the amendment, specifically when we talk about a:

"possible outline of a Programme for Government which listed a number of potential measures"

with regard to climate change. Yes, the deal was tabled by the two Governments, but it was signed up to by the two biggest parties, and, as I recall, the DUP was quick out of the blocks to do so. It was the basis on which five parties, including my own, went into the Executive in good faith. Do we now see the DUP distancing itself from the agreement, even the uncontroversial aspects, such as commitments to tackling climate change, —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that interventions should be brief.

Mr Durkan: — or an attempt to water it down?

Mr Irwin: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not believe so. I think these issues need to be thought out properly and looked at in great detail before decisions are rushed in to.

As I said, I speak as someone who has endeavoured to care for the environment for decades, and I want to see people with a new-found respect for the environment around them. One aspect of any climate response must be a renewed sense of understanding of how our daily actions impact on the environment. As a Province, we can control only what is within our gift to control. It is, therefore, clear that we can, in the very near future, make decisions in a balanced and measured way that continue to protect our green and pleasant land and, in fact, create new opportunities.

The 'New Decade, New Approach' document, of course, takes a wide and encompassing approach to the running of Northern Ireland. Part 2, paragraph 23 of the deal says:

"By April 2020, informed by a detailed stakeholder engagement process, the Executive will publish a new strategic level outcomes-based Programme for Government aligned to a multi-year budget with a sustained approach to public finances and prioritised investment in infrastructure and public services. The new Programme will be aimed at delivering lasting changes and improvements in key priority areas and will include measures aimed at: removing paramilitarism, ending sectarianism, transforming health and social care, reforming education, ensuring

households have access to good quality, affordable and sustainable homes, addressing climate change, creating good jobs and protecting workers' rights."

Further, it states:

"The new Programme for Government will be supported by an Anti-poverty strategy; an Economic/Industrial strategy; and an Investment strategy."

In addressing climate change, as the amendment suggests, actions on this issue must be complementary to our ambitions in the Programme for Government. It cannot be in competition with our objectives as an Assembly. For instance, an economic and industrial strategy must be positive and forward-looking but also respectful and meaningful in protecting our environment. This is where our efforts need to be directed, with full engagement from the industry, to arrive at a sustainable and desirable set of objectives to ensure that our Province does its share to lessen the impacts of climate change.

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

Mr Irwin: That is why, through our amendment, I encourage Executive parties to ensure that every effort is made to construct and agree a Programme for Government that is ambitious, that promotes and encourages economic and social enhancement, and that also contains measured approaches to meet the challenges of climate change and its effects.

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

Mr Irwin: There are challenging times, and it is up to the House to meet these challenges.

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

Mr Irwin: I come up with solutions, so I propose the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): This is Pat Catney's first opportunity to speak as a private Member. I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption, provided, of course, that you do provoke an interruption yourself.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I express my gratitude to the Speaker of the House for his role in going back and securing the funding for a little school called St John the Baptist. The school enhancement programme brought the Minister out to west Belfast to visit that school. For me, that was a wonderful example of how and in what way this place is meant to work. As the old advert says, "We're better together".

This is my maiden speech, 1,168 days since the people of Lagan Valley elected me to the Chamber. I come from the world of business. I got my first job in the bar at the age of 15, and I have worked ever since. I was elected to this Chamber to work, and it is disgraceful that we have not been able to work whilst people in our communities are suffering, whether from poverty, mental health or lack of a hospital bed. We can never let such action occur again.

I am, however, very glad that I have the opportunity to use my maiden speech — sounds strange when you say "maiden speech" at the age that I am at, but anyhow *[Laughter]* — to speak on this incredibly important motion. I am particularly glad that the motion brings the issue of the

climate emergency to the Assembly Floor so soon after we have been able to re-form. This is not only because of the devastation the climate emergency will cause to Northern Ireland but because, in the past, many in the Chamber have expressed some curious views when it comes to climate change. Even former Ministers of the Environment have expressed some foolish views denying the existence of climate change. I hope that, in supporting the motion, the Assembly shows all the people of Northern Ireland that this really is a new decade and a new approach.

The climate emergency impacts on a wide range of areas. That is why our plan for tackling it needs to be broad and far-reaching. These plans will not only see benefits in our environment. A move to a greener energy supply creates a more secure energy supply that is less vulnerable to global tensions that we cannot control. A greener economy not only cuts down waste but cuts down on cost, allowing our businesses to take home more of their hard-earned profits — probably to pay the rates. A greener public transport system not only reduces our emissions but creates a more connected and accessible society for us all that boosts productivity, innovation and well-being, from our rural towns to our modern cities. On a personal note, I would add that a lot of the infrastructure already exists, including the disused railway line that runs between Lisburn and Antrim, which I believe we should try to open up. All right, Minister, I got that in. *[Laughter.]* A wide-ranging plan of action does not have to be a complicated one. That has been shown by our colleagues in Dublin, who have committed to get one million electric vehicles on the road and 500,000 homes insulated and to move to 70% of power from renewable resources by 2030. I welcome the UK's ambitious goal of net zero emissions by 2050 but, to achieve it, we need to develop our list of simple and real waypoints towards that goal so that the people can keep us in check and moving forward every day. I hope to see Ministers bring forward some such proposals as soon as possible.

I want to highlight just one more policy. I was delighted to see the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency included in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. An independent EPA is vital to our achieving our goals for a cleaner and greener environment. I believe it to be so important that I made an election promise to bring forward a private Member's Bill to establish an independent EPA if it was not included in the Programme for Government. It is also a development that the SDLP has been calling for for a very long time, having first been proposed by my colleague Alex Attwood. I think that I speak for all of us and all our citizens when I say that I am glad that everyone else has caught up with this idea.

Over Christmas, I welcomed my third granddaughter into this world. It has been a time of great joy in our family, and I look at her and all my granddaughters and see the potential of all that is to come after me.

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

Mr Catney: As a Member of this Chamber and as a grandfather, I must do all I can to make sure that the next generation can grow up in a world that allows its potential to flourish, and that is why I beg you all to support the motion and amendment No 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): This is also John Stewart's first opportunity to speak as a private Member,

and I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption, provided he does not provoke an interruption.

Mr Stewart: I might be happy to take an intervention at some stage.

What a privilege to follow the Member for Lagan Valley, who I had the privilege to be elected with, along with a few others, in 2017. We have waited 1,168 days for this moment, and what a wait it has been. It is a moment that, at some stage in the last three years, I honestly thought would never come, and I am so pleased that we are here today.

It is 20 years since I sat — roughly in this seat — with my Carrickfergus Grammar School politics class. When we were at school, many of us came to visit the “Big House”, and I remember saying to my teacher at the time, Miss McKinley, how I would love to do this for real one day and represent the people of East Antrim. It is an immense honour to stand here today and give this maiden speech representing each and every one of them. It is a responsibility that I will never take for granted.

East Antrim, as I am sure you will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, is the centre of the universe and the nicest constituency in Northern Ireland. I think that you will give me a bit of leeway to reflect on that for a second. It is full of our tourist gems, the gateway to the Causeway coast and a drive that has been described by many as the nicest anywhere in the world. It is a constituency with a wonderful blend of rural communities and coastal towns and villages, from Carrickfergus to Carnlough, from Greenisland to Glenarm, from the Glynn to Glenoe, and if there was any upside to the hiatus of the last two years, it was the ability to represent the people of East Antrim daily on the constituency matters that matter to them.

I am a proud, progressive, liberal unionist; some would probably say too progressive at times. I have a business background and spent seven years in local government. My grandfather was a B-Special, my dad was an RUC officer, and I am a member of Her Majesty's Reserve army. Many in the Chamber will have fundamental differences with me on our past and how we see it, and probably on the future as well, and we will debate those out in a respectful manner, but there are many issues that we will agree on, whether it is on housing, health, mental health, education, growing the economy or the housing crisis we face. There are hundreds of issues that each and every one of us in the Chamber can get behind each other on and agree on. Those are bread-and-butter issues and real-life issues, and that is why we are all here. That is what we agree on.

The climate change emergency is also one of those issues. It is not only massive here but across the world and, as the spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party on climate change, I am happy to support amendment No 1 and the specific asks of the original motion, specifically Northern Ireland-specific legislation in the form of an all-encompassing climate change Act, Northern Ireland targets on emissions and the need for an independent environment protection agency, in addition to our party's commitment to see a zero net carbon future by 2035.

None of us in the Chamber is a climate scientist. The only sensible thing for us to do, in understanding the science behind climate change, is to follow the advice

of the overwhelming number of scientific experts. The science behind this — the link between CO₂ and rising temperatures, along with the associated risks of burning fossil fuels — have been well established for decades, but the issue has probably only been in the political agenda since the late '80s. It took a politician with a scientific background and, like it or not, a lot of courage to spell out the implications. They said:

“I spoke about the global threat of climate change. I set out the magnitude of the challenge we face. Until recently, we have always thought that whatever progress humanity makes, our planet would stay much the same. That may no longer be true.”

An inconvenient truth perhaps, but it was not Al Gore; it was Margaret Thatcher speaking in October 1989. That was over 30 years ago, and, since then, the narrative has evolved greatly, with virtually all developed countries around the world having implemented essential legislation to help combat the causes and effects of climate change.

6.15 pm

There has been a lot of talk in the Assembly about a fresh start and the feeling that we need to not rake over the past and be partisan for the sake of it. However, as a new legislator, I feel I need to ask this question: why are we the only devolved region of the UK that does not have an independent EPA and climate change-specific targets?

Looking back to the period of devolution post 2007, there seems an obvious conclusion to be made. While officials in various Departments, local government and NGOs did a sterling job on climate change, there has been a severe lack of political leadership. As a result, the last Stormont Executive was the only Administration in the UK and Ireland not to have produced its own laws to cut carbon emissions. I am not saying, Mr Speaker, that legislation is a panacea to all the problems — and there is an awful lot of virtue signalling on this issue — but the impression has been given for too long that Northern Ireland does not take the issue seriously, and that is unfortunate to say the least.

What we need can be summed up in two words: mitigation and adaptation; mitigation meaning addressing the causes of climate change — many of them have been alluded to today, and we will get into the nuts and bolts of that later; and adaptation —

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

Mr Stewart: — meaning the necessary changes to reduce and negate the effects of climate change, such as building sea walls and other things in our coastal communities. Neither of these will be easy, and they are not meant to be easy. They cannot be done in a silo mentality but, rather, with a cross-departmental and collegiate approach. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Now, we will have a third maiden speech in a row. This is Andrew Muir's first opportunity to speak as a private Member. I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will start by welcoming you to the role and thanking everyone throughout the Chamber for the welcome that has been

provided to me. In the short period since I became an MLA, one thing that has become acutely apparent to me is that, whilst these institutions are supported by structures, it is relationships that form their foundation. If the last three years have taught us anything, it should be the importance of relationships as the way to strengthen the foundation of these institutions.

Talking of relationships, this brings me to the reason why I am here, namely the elevation of my predecessor to the House of Commons. My relationship with Stephen Farry started nearly 30 years ago in the early 1990s, when we were both youngish and I delivered leaflets and canvassed for Stephen's election to council. I have deeply admired his dedication, insight, integrity and courtesy shown to all. I was, therefore, absolutely delighted to see Stephen elected as my Member of Parliament, and honoured to have been selected by the Alliance Party as his replacement.

Stephen Farry follows in the footsteps of Lady Sylvia Hermon, who personified North Down in so many ways for the 18 years that she served as MP. She was respectful, principled and passionately committed to representing and reaching out to all communities. Stephen Farry and Lady Sylvia Hermon say everything about why I love north Down. I am so immensely proud to represent the people and the place where I was born, grew up and live.

While some may not think of it as remotely enjoyable, one way that I get to enjoy north Down is by running many miles amongst the wonderful natural environment that we are so lucky to have, but, Members, as we have seen in recent times, we cannot take our environment for granted. The impact of climate change has already taken effect on the most vulnerable across the globe. The risk of climate catastrophe is ever-increasing, especially if we do not take action now. I am, therefore, glad that one of the first motions to be debated in this place during this mandate is about such a topic. At this point, I should declare for the record that I am a former employee of Translink and councillor on Ards and North Down Borough Council.

Whilst I welcome the commitments given in the motion and in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, if we are to genuinely declare a climate emergency, I suggest we must be prepared to respond accordingly. The commitments given in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document should be the bare minimum, and, as a result, I cannot support amendment No 2. The independent Environmental Protection Agency must be urgently established to bring us into line with the rest of the British Isles and Europe. It must have real teeth and real freedom to pursue its remit with vigour. The targets in the Climate Change Act must stretch us in ways that we have never envisaged. Petrol and diesel cars need to be phased out. Plans to expand the Sydenham bypass to three lanes need to be shelved. The way we move around has to change.

A step change in how we produce and use energy is essential. It should not just be about reduce, reuse and recycle but rather reduce, reuse, recycle and rethink — rethinking everything we do about waste. We need a collective effort involving everyone at every level of society and government. It would be great if this were the first issue to be addressed by the citizens' assembly.

I believe that we are up to the challenge. As Alan Turing — a personal hero of mine — once said:

"We can only see a short distance ahead, but we can see plenty there that needs to be done."

Plenty does need to be done, but I believe that together we can do it.

I am wearing a dicky bow. Hopefully, that is a tradition that has been set for maiden speeches. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Frew: How refreshing it is to hear so many maiden speeches today. We should all be thankful that we are here debating these issues. We have been out of this place for far too long, and it has been a disgrace.

With this seat comes a lot of responsibility. With a five-party Executive now in place, the Assembly becomes much more important and critical, as does the work in our scrutiny Committees. We need an era that we have never had. We need the Executive to step up with courage and bring to us an era of decision like we have never had.

MLAs must hold their nerve not only in scrutiny but in difficult decisions that must be taken for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. That has been lacking for many years in this place. It is not good enough that this place functions; we need decisions to be taken and taken quickly.

For us to be able to make decisions, we have to be informed. We have to ensure that, when we make decisions, they are the right ones for the people of Northern Ireland. I worry and fear for the state of our Civil Service and some Departments in this place.

Do not get me wrong: there is some great expertise around Civil Service-land, and there are some shiny, fine cogs in what I believe is a broken machine. It should be our task to make sure that that machine is fixed and running smoothly. I cite three examples, because if we are to make tough decisions on these big political issues — one of them being climate change — we need to make sure that we are taking the right steps.

I hark back to the decision that Secretary of State Karen Bradley made, bringing in the Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) (No. 2) Act, whereby the tariffs of the RHI scheme were stripped. That brought great hardship to recipients, the farming community in particular, especially poultry farmers, whereby they are facing a dilemma such as the industry has never faced before.

Are we going to leave them hanging in that position? It might be good, sound political policy for any party to want to scrap the RHI scheme but, before you make that decision, have you read the Cornwall review? Have you read the Buglass review? Have you even read the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee "raw deal" report? Before we make any decisions in this place, and before the Executive make decisions, we need to be informed about what has taken place, and I am not sure that any of us are in that position. None of us has yet shone a light into the energy branch as to what went on in the years before we got to this place.

I also suggest that Members look up the work that the Economy Committee did on the Northern Ireland-only ROC, where I believe that Department officials tried to mislead the Committee on what Whitehall and other Ministers in Westminster were expecting of us at that time.

I go on to my third point. If we want to have a sound energy policy, we need a suitable system operator for Northern Ireland (SONI). I do not believe for one moment that we have one at present. I believe that SONI is a shell of its previous self and is not capable of making sound energy decisions on behalf of the consumers of Northern Ireland. Before we go making energy policy, we need to make sure that the machine below it — the machine that will implement it — is capable of conducting that policy as we see fit. It could be party policy to have one wish or another, but unless we are informed and given the correct reports and the correct information, we are in a very bad place. I fear for the future if we do not get it right this time, because we will get only one more crack at it.

Mr McGuigan: I can confirm that, even though this is not my maiden speech, today is a potentially historic day for the Assembly. If we support the motion and amendment No. 1, we will join a handful of legislatures across the world that have done what is long overdue.

More importantly, we will have collectively pledged to tackle the climate emergency. We will be resolving to confront it with urgency and focus. We stand today not just recognising that our climate is changing but knowing that it has already changed profoundly. Human activity to date has set in motion emissions that have radically altered the delicate balance that creates and sustains life on this planet.

Today is perhaps not the time to document the staggering loss of biodiversity that has already unfolded or to lament the rapid melting of ice caps, destruction of habitat or the growth of barren deserts around the world. It may not even be the time to bear witness to the extraordinary destructive weather events that we have seen unfold in front of us over the past number of weeks and months in places such as Australia and the United States. Indeed, on this island, increasing numbers of severe storm events continue to reach our shores.

Today is the time to talk about action. Real, meaningful and radical climate action is required to halt the advance of climate breakdown. The steps we must take should not be seen as a threat or something that we must endure as a hardship. In fact, the opposite is true. The motion calls for a "just transition" to a cleaner, more efficient and more cooperative society. It calls for a "green new deal".

Of course, it will involve transformative change, but change for the good. First and foremost, we must change the ways in which we consume energy, including heating and powering our homes and communities and through our travel habits. How much time in our life is spent pent up in cars in endless traffic jams, roads full beyond capacity, when we could be using a modern and efficient public transport system? A society over-reliant on cars is a society embracing the least efficient and most harmful mode of transport. It is a society ignoring the social, health and transport benefits of active travel. I say that not to put the blame or the responsibility for taking action on hard-pressed families living in communities with next to no decent public transport facilities, cycle lanes or greenways in rural communities in constituencies such as mine. We all have a part to play. By passing the motion, we in the Assembly will have a moral obligation to assist people in playing their part.

I welcome the attendance of the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. I am disappointed that the

Minister for Infrastructure has just left. This debate is about lots of responsibilities for Minister Poots, but it is also about other Ministers on the Executive coming together and making collective decisions that will help move the situation forward.

Infrastructure, for example, will be key in that. I am a cyclist, and I like nothing more than talking about riding my bicycle. I was checking my Strava app — any athletes, runners or cyclists will know what Strava is — just before the debate. In the past seven years, I have cycled over 83,000 kilometres. Unfortunately, most of those 83,000 kilometres is cycling in the pursuit of leisure or sport, not in the pursuit of active transport or commuting because of the infrastructure where I live. That is the kind of thing that we need to change. Whether in this city or others, we need a separate cycle infrastructure that allows people to feel safe travelling to and from their work.

We need an effective transport system, we need safe passing laws, and we need all our new developments to take a keen eye to active travel. We need an innovative and modern public transport authority for the North, and we need strong and effective active travel legislation. We need a strategy and funding to rapidly grow and decarbonise our public transport fleet. T

The action that we need will involve a change in all our public services. Powering our health system with clean energy, retrofitting homes to conserve heat and money and educating young people on the benefits of more sustainable lifestyles will improve the quality of life for everyone while creating a greener and fairer economy. All this must be led by government. People cannot make the changes without being given the alternatives. I welcome all the commitments that people made today on the motion and amendment No 1, and I welcome the commitments and the promises made in 'New Decade, New Approach', including the commitment to an Act and an independent environmental protection agency. After today's debate, hopefully, this will be the task of all of us, and it will be our duty to implement it.

6.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): In the interests of balance, I call Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: So, the Northern Ireland Assembly is going to declare a climate emergency. That is it sorted, then — wow. What is meant by the Northern Ireland Assembly declaring a climate emergency? Are we going to switch off the lights and bring in the candles? Are we going to send Minister Poots home not in his limo but on a bicycle? What nonsense are we talking here? Phraseology like this: this pitiful Assembly, which cannot even sort itself out, is going to declare a climate emergency. What turbocharged virtue signalling — that is all it is.

It is not that the climate does not change. The debate is this: what causes it to change? Now, I do not know: maybe we have some climate deniers in our midst. Maybe they deny the medieval warm period. Maybe it never happened. If it did, what are we going to blame? Factories? I do not think so. Cows? I do not think so. Electricity? Fossil fuels? I do not think so. It happened, and then, a few centuries later, in the 17th century, for 10 years during that century, the River Thames froze over as the climate cycle switched the other way.

Climate change happens, but the question is this: why are we working ourselves up into a frenzy in the belief that this puny Assembly — the puny man — in some way can stop the forces of nature? Yet, that is what we are doing. We are all getting, it seems, on the bandwagon of Greta this and Greta that. Remember Al Gore? Remember the great hero of climate change? In 2009, he, with great solemnity, told the world that, in five to seven years, there would be no ice at the North Pole.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. Further to his point, he said that single, small entities cannot effect change by standing up and resisting larger things. Why does the Member bother to intervene in a debate like this, if that is the way he feels? *[Laughter.]*

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

Mr Allister: Some small things can be quite effective *[Laughter.]* Let us be serious. Is the Assembly serious, or is it just virtue signalling to say, "We are going to do this, we are going to do that, because it makes us feel good"? We have had more doomsday predictions from climate alarmists than we have ever had from the most extreme and ludicrous religious cult. "The apocalypse is upon us", according to these folk: "We are going to do this, and we are going to do that". Try as you might, you will not change the natural cycle of nature. You are not as big as that. Therefore, reality needs to dawn.

Yes, it is absolutely right that, as the custodians of this beautiful planet, we have a bounden duty to hand it on to the next generations in as fantastic a shape as we can. Of course, we should not be reckless. We should not be wanton in how we treat it. We should be sensible. We should be controlled. Where we can do things better, we should certainly do them better, but the idea that, suddenly, we are going to stop the world, we are going to kill off all the cows, because they belch and do all sorts of things, and we are going to save the world is such patent nonsense. Yes, focus on the real; forget the fantasy. If we did that, maybe we would get focused on things that we can do something about and get off our high horse that we somehow can declare with effect a climate emergency. Maybe somebody could tell me what it is.

Mr M Bradley: I congratulate the three Members who made their maiden speeches, particularly the Member who struck a blow for ageism and us grandfathers.

Climate change is a global emergency. We are all agreed on that. We in Northern Ireland must play our part to reduce its effects. The evidence is all around us: more violent storms, heavy rains, floods, rising sea levels, shrinking ice sheets and wildlife threatened with extinction. The world is not in a good place. While the main sources of warming lie elsewhere, change is required to reduce what are commonly known as greenhouse gases — carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluorocarbons — which are known to directly contribute to the greenhouse effect. There are other initiatives: reduce vehicle journeys, more use of public transport, promotion of renewable energy, a new greener agenda, promotion of electric cars etc. Those are all things that we can do. To take a point that one Member made, a large journey begins with a small step. We have to try to take small steps here in Northern Ireland.

The reduction of ammonia in farming practices, including some form of renewable energy away from the use of fossil

fuels and gas in farming, particularly poultry production, must be tackled immediately. That includes a long, hard look at what is to replace RHI and what options are available. A reforestation plan for Northern Ireland with a "One person, one tree" planting scheme in 2021 to plant a tree for every person who resides here is a small first step. A single tree has the potential to recycle a ton of carbon in its lifetime. However, there needs to be a concentrated effort to plant and nurture more trees across Northern Ireland. I know that the Minister has a keen interest in that. While reforestation currently sits at around 8%, I believe that, with greater effort, we could achieve a target of 20% or more.

All Departments have a role to play. I think about the vast estate of our schools and colleges. Further extensive planting along our road network is another way of introducing trees and hedgerows. There are open spaces at our hospitals, along our riverbanks and in our town and city centres. That is all open space with the potential of helping reforestation across Northern Ireland and, at the same time, creating quality space. All that will help to reduce the carbon footprint.

We should look at providing greater protection for trees in current planning applications and building works that are being carried out and at building houses and buildings etc in a more environmentally aware way. Trees that have to be removed in the name of progress should be replaced, and we need to revisit the criteria for tree preservation orders. We should look at creating a natural sink to help to reduce our carbon footprint, and that can be achieved only by strategic thinking and planning.

Climate change is the remit of us all, and every Department has an important role to play. An independent environmental protection agency is one of the ways to tackle climate change in Northern Ireland. The time frame in which to have the independent environmental protection agency is immediate. The planet is the one thing that we all have in common. Work has to start now, but in a well-thought-out and well-structured way. Therefore, I support amendment No 2.

Ms C Kelly: There is no question that the dedicated and selfless actions of young people have forced the climate emergency on to the political agenda around the world. Global days of action, school strikes and the fearless, irresistible message of urgency from people such as Greta Thunberg have woken up policymakers and Governments around the world. We have young people to thank for the relative urgency with which we now consider the breakdown of our climate and the staggering loss of biodiversity all around us. Perhaps we should ask why. Why has it taken people whose futures are at risk to get us to wake up to the evidence that has surrounded us for decades?

The evidence has been clear for some time that the destructive activity of humanity and our economic system has broken our planetary boundaries and that we are rapidly changing the climate that we all depend on for survival. For too long, we have been guilty of inaction. That ends now. We have an undeniable and irrefutable moral responsibility to pass on to young people a safe climate future. In their name we act today. They have demanded that we recognise the scale of the climate emergency facing us, and, by agreeing the motion, hopefully we will. I commend young people across the North and across

the island who have taken their future into their own hands and demanded action. Let us not let them down. Let us confront the economic and social systems that have pushed our climate and biodiversity to the point of breakdown. Let us commit today that we will not be found wanting in standing up for those who depend on us to secure their future. Let us act.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Sinead Kelly. Sinead will be our final Member to speak. Sorry, Sinead McLaughlin.

Ms McLaughlin: It is 100 seconds until midnight. For those who are not aware, for over 70 years, the 'Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' has published an annual assessment of the likelihood of a man-made global catastrophe. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Doomsday Clock measured the probability of an extinction-level event as the nations of the world edged closer to nuclear conflict. Last week, at the annual assessment, former Irish president Mary Robinson revealed that the twin threats of increasing geopolitical instability and rapid climate change have brought us closer than ever to the brink of irreversible disaster.

The climate crisis is the most pressing global challenge we face, but it cannot be addressed without action at local, regional and international level. That means that we have a part to play, and it will mean that difficult decisions have to be made. It begins with the Assembly facing up to the scale of the crisis that we face. The suspension of the Assembly cost us precious time, and we cannot afford to be complacent. We must join the legislators of the world who have made an unambiguous declaration of climate emergency, and, having declared an emergency, we need an action plan that focuses on prevention and mitigation. I fully support the proposals in the motion and amendment No 1, all of which are closely interrelated.

I will focus now on the viability of the green new deal from an economic perspective. A green new deal offers exciting economic opportunities that will benefit people, communities and businesses. For instance, carbon savings would be made by expanding public transport infrastructure to reduce journeys made by cars. Other benefits include job creation, increased mobility and a reduction in air pollution. Transitioning to a zero-carbon society also requires an increase in the production of renewable energy. That would strengthen our energy security and reduce our dependence on other countries for fossil fuel imports, thus creating a more sustainable society.

We have already laid solid foundations. Recent statistics from the Department for the Economy show that 44.9% of total electricity consumption in Northern Ireland is generated from local renewable sources.

However, the number of new renewable installations is declining, so further investment is needed to sustain growth. One approach would be to implement the proposal that seeks to replace the failed RHI scheme with a new scheme that effectively cuts carbon emissions.

6.45 pm

Clean energy can be affordable and could help to alleviate the high rate of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, which currently stands at 42%. Work to improve energy efficiency will further reduce the energy bill for consumers, as well as minimising carbon emissions. Also, analysis from the European Commission shows that employment created

from investing in energy efficiency has the potential to be 2.5 to 4 times larger than that from investing in oil and natural gas.

The SDLP supports the calls for binding emissions reduction targets that are underpinned by legislation. On that note, I welcome the Minister for Infrastructure's announcement about next-generation public transport and the unveiling of hydrogen fuel cell busses, which was made just last week. We need a similar programme to improve efficiency in our housing stock, which not only helps the environment but helps to reduce fuel costs for the most hard-pressed families in our society.

The new energy strategy being produced by the Department for the Economy must break our reliance on destructive legacy fuels and plot a new course for a clean and green sustainable future. We have an immense opportunity to become global leaders in renewable technology, with our on and offshore wind, the high quality

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

Ms McLaughlin: — geothermal points along the north coast and investing in tidal energy: that is our future. We must prepare to exploit those opportunities and prepare our economy for industry transition. Mr Speaker, the clock is ticking. The climate crisis is real and is escalating.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The clock is ticking; your time is up. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McLaughlin: It is time we escalated our response.

Mr Carroll: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Too often, in the last Assembly, the voices of the smaller parties were not heard. Today, it is a shame that the voice of my party, and those who vote for us, has not been heard. My party provides the only eco-socialist voice in the Chamber. I ask you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and your office to look at how every voice and all parties can be included in future debates.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We will reflect on what you have said, but I hope that you will reflect on the fact that diverse opinion was brought into the debate. That is one of the issues that the Speaker or a Deputy Speaker has to determine when deciding who is called to speak. I hope you appreciate the thinking behind that.

I now call the Minister. You have a maximum of 15 minutes.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Dr Archibald, Miss Woods and Mr Irwin for moving the motion and the amendments to the motion. The Department for the Economy has a number of issues, and I will speak on its behalf as well.

I welcome the widespread interest from colleagues throughout the Chamber today, and, if Mr Carroll wants to make an intervention, I will happily give way, providing that he does not speak for too long.

I note that we had no fewer than three maiden speeches, which all had something going for them. In Mr Muir's instance, he spoke about having the greatest Alliance Minister representing his area as an MP, and, of course, Mr Catney and Mr Stewart also have great MPs. *[Laughter.]* I have warned Mr Catney, because we get on quite well and

come from a similar family background, that the Chamber is like a boxing ring: we cut the tripe out of each other inside, but we can be pleasant to each other outside. Today, Mr Catney, it is good news: I am not going to have a go at you in here, as you made a great speech. It was wonderful. Well done to you and to Mr Stewart and Mr Muir.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will the Minister support the calls for no further extraction of fossil fuels in our country? It would be very significant for people who are campaigning to save the environment if he said, today, that he would refuse to support further extraction, and would call for no more exploration of fossil fuels. Will he support that call?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. I would like to have heard more of the argumentation behind it, and maybe we will at a future time. I know that we have very limited extraction of fossil fuels in Northern Ireland and I hope to move to a circumstance where we use considerably less fossil fuel, where we require less gas from Russia, less oil from the Middle East and all of that. Those are all things that we wish to do.

In my previous role in the DOE, we did a lot of work on renewable energy, and, as a consequence of that, today 45% of our electricity comes from renewable energy. We have the opportunity to drive that up further, and we will do that in meeting the challenges that lie ahead.

Climate change is a global challenge that needs to be addressed through comprehensive and effective global actions. It requires actions across all society to help to reduce carbon emissions. I am pleased to see that the UK's leadership in taking action to combat climate change was recognised this year in its presidency of the United Nations Conference of Parties on climate change. The UK will be hosting the annual conference, known as COP 26, later this year in Glasgow, and I intend that Northern Ireland will play its full part in that event.

I appreciate what an emotive subject climate change is and how some people want to see immediate action to make a difference. They want to use the language of crisis to generate support for change. We can see that wording in the motion, and I do not doubt the sincerity of many of those who take that view. My party also wants to see action to tackle climate change, but we want to see practical measures that make a real, tangible difference, and we want to be sure that we do not rush into schemes that could end up making matters worse. Ultimately, we will all need to work together if we are to confront the issue effectively. We need to be wary that the language we use does not make it harder to work together. Action to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to our changing climate should not be viewed as a burden but as an opportunity, and we need to create a stronger, prosperous and more sustainable green low-carbon economy and enhanced natural environment for everyone.

I am sceptical that there are quick fixes on the issue, albeit they are desirable, but I suspect that someone would have found them by now if that were the case. Addressing climate change will take a sustained effort over many years, requiring input from academics, regulators, business and industry, local and central government and society in general if we are to reduce our emissions. Any actions that we take must be adequately resourced, with support for the most vulnerable in our society.

Our approach to climate change also needs to be realistic and sustainable. We cannot just close down business and industry, stop people travelling and hike up energy costs. Never mind the impact on the way we live, it would not work to reduce global CO2 emissions in any event. We would simply export our emissions overseas to those who were less committed to addressing the issue, but that does not mean that we can sit back and do nothing.

Following the report from the Committee on Climate Change on the UK's contribution to stopping global warming, the UK Government have set a UK net zero greenhouse gas emission target by 2050. That is to ensure that the UK contributes to the worldwide challenge of keeping global temperatures well below 2°C and pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5°C.

Northern Ireland needs to play its part in minimising greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to the UK net zero targets. However, we need to recognise that every region has distinct characteristics and will be able to contribute at different levels. The Government's independent expert advisers recognise that, and Scotland has greater scope for carbon storage and hopes to achieve net zero by 2045. Wales, where reductions would be harder to achieve, is hoping to achieve 95% reduction by 2050.

A greater percentage of our emissions are attributed to agriculture. It is 27%, as opposed to an average of 10% elsewhere in the UK. That, however, reflects the fact that we produce 10% of the UK's food, so our agri-food footprint is bound to be higher, and it is recognised that it is more challenging to cut emissions in that area. We need to be clear that carbon capture in agriculture is properly recorded so we can move forward on an evidential science-based analysis as opposed to wrapping up with what everybody else is doing elsewhere, given that we have a different food production system from many parts of Europe.

Accordingly, I am writing to the Committee on Climate Change, asking it to provide advice and assistance on what we need to do in Northern Ireland to reduce our emissions so that we can contribute equitably to the net zero target. On receipt of its recommendations, I will bring the Committee's advice on what we do on climate change to the Executive to agree a way forward. Decisions on any new cross-cutting approaches will naturally require Executive support.

My Department commissioned the Committee on Climate Change to produce a report on how Northern Ireland can reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the 2020s. 'Reducing emissions in Northern Ireland' was published in February 2019 and provides us with advice on how we can deliver reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The report has been circulated internally and externally, and its recommendations are being considered by all Northern Ireland Departments. Our response to climate change action is coordinated through a cross-departmental future generations and climate change group. I intend to personally oversee the group's work personally to ensure that we build on our response to the impacts of climate change.

Turning to what we have achieved so far, the latest Northern Ireland greenhouse gas inventory estimates emissions to be 20 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, which is an 18% reduction on the 24 million

tons that were emitted in 1990. Our reductions are of a lesser amount than elsewhere in the UK, but, nonetheless, they are still welcome. Statistical research released by my Department last week estimates that, by 2030, greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland will have reduced by 37% on their 1990 levels to 15 million tons. The level of confidence that we can place on some of those projections is naturally subject to wide variation. Much of the reduction has been achieved as a result of our efforts in the energy sector, particularly the increase in renewable energy to 45%. In other areas, it has proved more challenging to reduce emissions, and work remains for us on a number of those areas. Our emissions from transport have gone up, and our land use, which elsewhere is a carbon sink, is an emitter. There have been significant reductions in other sectors, such as waste, but those sectors are responsible for relatively small percentages of emissions. All of that emphasises the need to take action across the board.

I have set out initial actions that I intend to take to tackle climate change, and I will consider plans to bring forward climate change legislation and other approaches on climate change outlined in 'New Decade, New Approach'. However, these are significant and complex issues that have long-term consequences, and I do not want to be bounced into rushing through measures that we later regret. I appreciate the need for swift action, but there are matters that need thorough analysis. It will take collaborative action across all parts of government, local government, business, industry and households to ensure that we leave the environment in better shape than that in which we found it.

I will say a quick word about climate change adaption. Much of the climate change debate is about mitigating the impact of our emissions, but we also need to adapt to the changes that are already happening, whether those are due to rising sea levels, a wetter climate or more extreme weather. As required by the UK Climate Change Act 2008, a second five-year Northern Ireland climate change adaption programme was recently published by my Department. It contains government and outside government responses to the latest climate change risks identified for Northern Ireland. Again, we need to work together on building a resilient Northern Ireland.

The biodiversity information compiled by the NIEA and various other stakeholders has indicated that there is a variety of pressures in Northern Ireland. My Department is refreshing the Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy to align our targets with post-2020 global diversity targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity. Once again, we need to act collectively, as improvements in biodiversity can be achieved only when we work together.

On the matter of establishing an independent environmental protection agency to oversee the work, I say that environmental governance is much wider than the degree of independence of one particular agency. It is about making appropriate decisions on the environmental outcomes that we are seeking to achieve and about the effective and efficient deployment of limited resources to achieve those outcomes. In November 2017, a report on a review of environmental governance, jointly commissioned by a number of environmental NGOs, stated that forming an independent environmental agency without pinpointing all the problems would probably mean that any reforms would not operationally have much

impact. Any decision on a fundamental structural change to the NIEA is, of course, a matter for the Executive, but a robust economic appraisal of the costs and benefits of having an independent agency will be necessary to inform that decision properly. I remain open to the idea of an independent environmental protection agency, and that is something that we will look at.

7.00 pm

We also have the opportunity of looking at the office of environmental protection, which is being developed in Westminster to take the place of what would previously have been carried out by the European Commission.

We are planning to eliminate plastic pollution. That is an absolute must. We need to do more to reduce our dependence on single-use plastic bags. It is estimated that we have brought in some £19 million since the introduction of the plastic bag levy and that we have used 300 million fewer single-use bags as a consequence. I pay tribute to Mr Durkan for his work in bringing that in. It has been a significant success story. My Department also introduced a ban on the manufacture and sale of rinse-off personal care products, including microbeads, in March 2019. That will have a significant benefit, as it is estimated that products used in a single shower could result in 100,000 plastic particles entering the sewerage system.

Where an energy strategy is concerned, Sinn Féin brought forward a notion about closing down RHI. Let me say this: the ambitions of RHI were good. The introduction of the renewable heat incentive — there are renewable heat initiatives in the Republic of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales — has reduced ammonia, carbon and methane in our environment. A crude closure would mean a return to fossil fuels, which would be environmentally damaging. It is an entirely contradictory position for Sinn Féin to suggest that we should close RHI and reduce carbon because, if you close the RHI, you will increase carbon. The scheme is already less effective as a consequence of Karen Bradley rushing legislation through Westminster. The same Karen Bradley could not bring forward legislation on historical institutional abuse victims, but, nonetheless, she brought legislation through Westminster that made entirely unjustifiable cuts, which made the running of the boilers a huge burden for those who invested heavily in the capital cost of installation. Members may think it is popular because one particular newspaper happens to run a story about it very regularly — it has somewhat of an obsession with it — and it is bad news, given the way it is put out there. It is, but the reality is that a lot of good has come from the renewable heat initiative. From 2012 to 2030, the renewable heat initiative will account for 6% to 7% of the greenhouse gas reductions in Northern Ireland that we are seeking.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Minister to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Poots: That goes across all sectors.

There is a significant opportunity. We are currently sending £22 million a year back to Westminster. We need to get this issue right, not rushed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Mr Gary Middleton to wind on amendment No 2.

Mr Middleton: I thank all the Members who contributed, and I congratulate the new Members on their maiden

speeches. I am glad my maiden speech was made long before the suggested tradition of wearing a bow tie for it. *[Laughter.]* I support, obviously, amendment No 2, which is tabled in the name of me and my party colleague William Irwin. I think it is fair to say, from all the contributions today, that people are concerned about climate change. Some of us are more energised than others, but I think people are genuinely concerned and know that action needs to be taken. The Executive and Assembly must use an evidence-based approach to ensure that there are measures and targets in the Programme for Government to tackle the climate crisis. In the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, there are a number of potential measures that would go some way to ensuring that there is a coordinated and strategic approach to the challenge of climate change. I must say at the outset that I welcome that the Minister is here. As Mr McGuigan touched on, we know this is something that goes across all Departments. I appreciate that the Infrastructure Minister is here as well. All our Departments have a role to play, and we very much need a coordinated approach to tackling climate change.

It is recognised that there will need to be actions and interventions across a wide range of areas to address the immediate and longer-term effects of climate change in a fair and just way. We will need all the Departments to work collaboratively and to lead by example in their relevant areas of responsibility. It is also noted, of course, that the Executive should bring forward a climate change Act. We know that, since the introduction of the UK Climate Change Act 2008, greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by 9% in Northern Ireland compared with a 27% fall for the whole of the UK. A Northern Ireland climate change Act will need to take into account the unique characteristics and challenges that we have here in Northern Ireland. In the February 2019 report by the Committee on Climate Change, analysis showed that nearly 30% of all greenhouse gas emissions here in Northern Ireland are from agriculture, compared with 10% in the rest of the UK. The farming sector here in Northern Ireland is also much more heavily livestock-based.

The Minister has said that legislation should not be rushed, and I agree with that. I think that any proposals, including those within the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, should be well thought out, should be tested and should be debated here in the Assembly Chamber. Unlike other devolved Administrations, energy policy is an area of devolved responsibility. We need to see a new energy strategy that has ambitious targets and actions as we transition towards a zero-carbon society. There is also a need for investment in our infrastructure. We need to encourage a greater uptake in public transport across all of Northern Ireland, not just here in Belfast. For example, charging points for electric vehicles need to be reviewed to ensure that they are sufficient to meet the current and future demands.

I also recognise and pay tribute to many of our local councils, which are already taking action on a range of issues affecting their environment. In the absence, of course, of the Assembly for the past three years, many local councils have taken the lead and have put forward similar motions, followed up, of course, with action in the areas of their responsibility. It has also been mentioned that the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency will be an important step to oversee and ensure that targets are met. It is indeed the case

that Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK and Ireland that does not have an EPA.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. I will pick up on his comments regarding an independent environmental protection agency. In no way is this an attack or an insinuation around the ability or dedication of the existing Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which often goes above and beyond to ensure the protection of our environment, but will the Member agree with me that, if we are looking at a new independent environment agency, there is logic in doing so on an all-island basis?

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

Mr Middleton: As you will see, I mentioned that it was mentioned that the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency is something that could be looked at. I think that we need to look at all options. Again, it is something that cannot be rushed into. I think we need to look at examples of best practice elsewhere and at what is unique and what works here in Northern Ireland.

There are a number of urgent actions needed to tackle climate change, and we need to ensure that these are implemented as soon as possible. I thank all the organisations and charities that have contacted each and every one of us with very useful briefing papers and information. We know that not all of that can be discussed here today, but I think, from listening to all the Members around the Chamber, it is very evident that this is an issue that we will not be leaving behind. It is an issue that will be in the forefront of all our minds as we go forward. I urge Members to support our amendment No 2, which we believe will send a clear signal that we are united in our commitments to deliver a new approach to climate change.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call on Clare Bailey to wind up on amendment No 1.

Ms Bailey: First, I thank the honourable Member Caoimhe Archibald and her party, Sinn Féin, for their willingness to engage in this debate and to work collaboratively and in a cross-party way on the amendment and throughout the debate. On a personal note, it is a bit bittersweet to watch the growing understanding across our public decision-making bodies and also within our political leadership, knowing and understanding that continuing as we are is just not an option. If we had understood that earlier, we could have had interventions earlier. I do not feel that we are being bounced into anything. These debates and this evidence base have been building for 50 years. I know that change comes slowly but just consider that. I have been watching the growing understanding that our environment is not a stand-alone thing that can be dealt with separately or by just recycling cardboard boxes. It is much more urgent and intrinsic. It goes to the very heart of who we are, what we are and how we do business. It goes to the heart of our education system, our health systems, our communities and to the very heart of our economic systems.

Jeremy Grantham from the London School of Economics states:

"Capitalism, by ignoring the finite nature of resources and by neglecting the long-term well-being of the planet and its potentially crucial biodiversity, threatens our existence"

Our very systems are our greatest threats. Our planet will, can and has sustained itself over billions of years, as the honourable Member Mr Allister has pointed out, and through many environments. It is us who are at risk.

The changes that we need to bring in cross every Department. While it is great to have our Minister for the environment here and speaking on the motion and our Minister for Infrastructure joining the debate and being here, it is to be regretted that their Executive colleagues are not here. They will carry as much responsibility in carrying out the changes that are needed. It is not just one Department; it is across Departments. The Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions need to be reviewed in light of the Paris Accord. Our energy strategy, which is out for consultation, needs to set ambitious targets and actions for a fair and just transition.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree with me that it is disappointing that the AERA Minister did not rule out opposing any further extraction of fossil fuels in the future? Does she agree that the only way we have a chance of saving our environment is by stopping the drilling for and extraction of fossil fuels?

Ms Bailey: It is a very valid point. I do not think that it is the only thing that we need to do, but it is very urgent. I think that the moratorium on fracking in Northern Ireland still stands, but I am willing to be corrected if I need to be.

We want to see the Executive bring forward a climate Act, environmental targets with strong legal underpinnings and an independent environmental protection agency to oversee that work and hold us all accountable. We need our communities to be protected and made resilient in the face of the changes that are to come. We can make sure that they can thrive.

The honourable Member for East Antrim tried to take the title of the centre of the universe earlier, but Belfast is the centre of the universe. It is the city that I am from, and it makes me so proud to see a Commissioner for Resilience in Belfast City Council doing fantastic work and the recently established Belfast Climate Commission linking up many networks across these islands to set new frameworks and share best practice.

There is real potential in what we would understand as a post-growth economy. There is a spirit level. There is greater health and well-being. The Minister is right: there is no quick fix. The economic and human cost, the environmental and biodiversity cost of not acting now will be greater if we delay. We have the evidence, but we are fast running out of the time. Fifty years of this evidence base is not being bounced, but we do delay very well here. Let us take a moment to decide whether we will have a new approach for a new decade and begin to deliver. I urge the House to support the motion and amendment No 1. Thank you for your time.

Mr McAleer: A LeasCheann Comhairle, thank you for the debate. I commend the proposers of the motion — I was one of them, I suppose. I want to draw on some of the points that were raised. I also want to make a couple of points.

From my perspective, as the agriculture and rural lead in the party, I want to make the point that farmers are at the very coalface of the climate. They face climate change all the time, are aware of the challenges and can play a big

part in the solution; indeed, if you were in a constituency such as mine and many others during 2013, you will have seen the big snow on the Sperrins. Again, in 2017, we saw the huge floods. That makes you realise how farmers are impacted on by climate change. They are part of the solution, and I think that they are willing to play their part in it. They provide grasslands, habitats and hedgerows for the purpose of carbon sequestration.

7.15 pm

I want to move on and try to summarise the debate. Fourteen Members spoke, so I will try to get through some of the key points. The debate was opened by Caoimhe Archibald, who made the point that we face into an ecological and environmental disaster because of climate breakdown. She referred to the international examples in, for example, Australia and outlined the economic and human impact of that and, indeed, the impact on wildlife and habitat as well. She also drew attention to the 1.5° target that is contained in the Paris Accord. She said that we must put climate action on a statutory footing and called for the implementation of the independent environmental protection agency to ensure that targets are met. She also underlined the point that that must be done on a joined-up and an all-island basis.

The next Member to speak was Rachel Woods of the Green Party, who, again, picked up on the 1.5° target. She referred to the biodiversity loss and the climate destruction that would lead to the collapse of humanity. She also called for a big role for the Executive and the Assembly in this and again underlined the calls for an independent environmental protection agency with teeth to be implemented in the next 12 months. She made the point that we needed a just transition from fossil fuels for the low-carbon economy and that we needed joined-up social dialogue. She also called for leadership and said that the time for it was now.

William Irwin was the third Member to speak. He spoke on amendment No 2 and made the point that farmers were the custodians of the landscape. He said that they have been protecting our landscape and our wonderful ecology. He said that he did not want to be alarmist but thinks that everybody has their part to play. He also drew attention to the environmental impact of litter on the verges and hedgerows and how it can blow into fields, become very unsightly and cause risk to livestock. He believes that a more balanced approach is needed to climate change and that it should be based on a very firm evidence-based approach.

Pat Catney was the fourth Member to speak, and he made the point that we needed to move swiftly towards a greener economy and a greener energy supply. He referred to greener public transport and gave some examples of the greenways, for example, that we have down in the South of Ireland. He also referred to the progress that the Government in the South have made towards reducing emissions and said that we needed proposals as soon as possible. He also welcomed the plans for the independent EPA and for a clean and green environment and said that it is important that we ensure that the next generation grows up in a world that allows its potential to flourish.

John Stewart of the Alliance — of the UUP? Is that right? *[Laughter.]* He supports amendment No 1. He said that we needed to follow the experts, and he questioned why

we were the only devolved region that had not got an independent EPA and climate targets. Again, he called for greater political leadership on this. He said that we need to take the issue more seriously, and he referred to the objectives of mitigation and adaptation and reiterated the need for a cross-departmental approach.

Andrew Muir of the Alliance Party spoke next and made the point that the New Decade, New Approach agreement is the bare minimum. He said that he cannot support amendment No 2. He said that the targets in a new climate change Act must stretch us and that the way we move around must change. I am guessing that he was drawing on his experience of working in Translink when he picked up on that point. He said that a rethink is required. However, he said that we are all up for the challenge and that together we can do it.

Paul Frew came in next and made the point that we need a new era of informed decision-making. He referred to Karen Bradley's decision to strip the RHI tariffs and made the point that no light has yet been shone on the energy branch. He said that we need a suitable system for sound energy policymaking and decisions.

My colleague Philip McGuigan spoke in favour of amendment No 1. He referred to the impacts of climate change and said that it was time to focus on the actions and steps that we must take for a green new deal. He said that there must be a change in the way that we consume energy and in our travel choices. He called for active travel legislation and made the point that we must engage in a modal shift to different types of infrastructure for how we travel and move ourselves around. He gave the examples of cycling infrastructure and safe passing laws. He also talked about retrofitting homes to save energy but said that this must be led by government.

Jim Allister came in with a different perspective. He rubbished the climate emergency as nonsense and accused most of us in the Chamber of being climate deniers. He made the points that climate change has been happening for centuries; that we as an Assembly cannot stop the forces of nature; and that the people who tabled the motion are being alarmist. He said that the reality needs to dawn.

Maurice Bradley of the DUP made reference to the global emergency and said that we must play our part. He referred to the impacts of global warming. He mentioned the need for reforestation, pointing out that we have only 8% tree cover in the North and should move towards a target of around 20%. He made the point that one tree has the potential to recycle a ton of carbon.

The eleventh Member to speak was Catherine Kelly. She commended the young people who have forced the issue of climate change onto the agenda and the world stage. She said that we have a moral responsibility to young people to pass on a safe climate future. She commended the young people who are demanding action and said that we must support them.

Sinead McLaughlin of the SDLP said that there are two issues — geopolitical instability and climate change — and said that this could lead to irreversible disaster. She said that we need to face up to the scale of the crisis. She said that we need an action plan to back this up. She said that the green new deal can usher in exciting opportunities, and she gave examples. She also talked about more

renewable energy. She said that we are sitting at over 40% but further investment will be needed. She welcomed the next generation of public transport and said that a new strategy must plot a course for the new green future. She also talked about tidal energy and preparing the economy for energy transition.

Minister Poots talked about the global challenge and how cross-society actions are needed. He reminded us that the COP 26 conference will take place in Glasgow later this year. He wants practical measures and no rushing into schemes that we may regret further down the line. He wants a low-carbon economy but no quick-fix solutions. He wants it to be more sustainable and lasting but said that we must be realistic. He made reference to the CCC aim of a net zero carbon by 2050 and made the point that the North can play its part in achieving that net target. He also made the point that agriculture produces 10% of food and that, as a result, we have higher emissions. The Minister said that any decision must be based on scientific evidence-based analysis and that a cross-departmental approach must be taken. He also made the point that there has been an 18% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions here since 1990 and that that is largely due to the efforts of the energy sector, but he said that there are other areas that are more challenging. In terms of actions, he said that he would consider legislating but does not want to be bounced and wants to take a collaborative approach. He made reference to a climate change adaptation programme.

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

Mr McAleer: Thank you. Minister Poots remains open to the idea of an independent EPA. He also made reference to the reduction in the number of single-use plastic bags and other areas of progress.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that, if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 27.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuillín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald and Miss Woods.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton,

*Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford,
Mr Storey.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr M Bradley and Mr Robinson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that we are facing climate breakdown and a biodiversity crisis; declares a climate emergency; and calls on the Executive to fulfil the climate action and environmental commitments agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement by commencing, as a matter of urgency, a review of the Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions in respect of the Paris Accord and the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100 and to ensure that targets are met; and further calls upon the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to begin immediately work to establish an independent environmental protection agency based on models of best practice that will be appointed within 12 months.

Adjourned at 7.40 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 February 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Francie Brolly

Mr Speaker: Members will have been saddened to learn of the passing of Francie Brolly, a former Assembly Member for the constituency of East Londonderry. I commence our business today by recording the passing of our former colleague Francie Brolly.

Is mór an onóir domh inniu ómós a thabhairt dár gcara Francie Brolly. Gabhaim comhbhrón ó chroí le clann Francie ar a bhás an tseachtain seo caite. It is my honour to pay tribute to Francie, who passed away just last week. Francie was a Member of the Assembly for over six years, being first elected in 2003. Like others, he came to the Chamber after another career in public service, as a teacher in Dungiven. While I pay tribute to him today from the Chair, I had the pleasure of serving on the Benches alongside Francie as a friend and a colleague. I am, therefore, I believe, well placed to say that Francie may have been too much of a free spirit for the formality of the Chamber.

I first met Francie in the confines of Long Kesh in 1972. He was a passionate advocate of rights and a great advocate of his language, which he loved. He loved his Irish traditional music, and he was a poet and songwriter. He loved his sport, particularly the GAA, so it is no surprise that, when he was a Member of the Assembly, he was an ardent member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. It is for those interests that many knew him best, and they are reflected through his entire family circle. On behalf of the Assembly, I express our sympathy to his wife, a bhean chéile, Anne, his children Joe, Proinnsias, Conal, Áine, Nodlaig and his 13 grandchildren. Suaimhneas síoraí dá anam uasal.

Members, as we have done in the past on these occasions, I will call a representative of each of the parties to speak for up to three minutes to pay tribute to our late friend and colleague. I will allow around 30 minutes for tributes, and, if there is enough time remaining after all the parties have spoken, I may be able to call other Members who rise in their places to say a few words. The Assembly will now pay its own respects.

Mrs O'Neill: Francie Brolly was a huge figure in the political life of East Derry for many years, and he will be sorely missed by many people. He was a tireless campaigner for civil and human rights and a committed Irish republican. Francie's republicanism was innate — it was in his very being, in his DNA — and it came out in everything that he did.

Aware of the injustices in life in the North, Francie, like many others, sought to challenge the status quo.

When the civil rights campaign began, Francie got fully behind it as a republican and stood up to fight for rights, equality and democracy. His leadership, determination and commitment shone through, and he was a stalwart at marches and demonstrations at that time.

His republican activism and challenging of the injustices that he saw around him led to his internment in Long Kesh for a period in the early 1970s. In the dark days of the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes, Francie was to the fore in supporting the campaigns of the prisoners, raising awareness of their demands.

As a teacher for many years, he is fondly remembered by the many hundreds of former pupils who recall his enthusiasm and passion. In recent days, many have paid tribute to him, showing that he will never, ever be forgotten.

A committed republican activist all his life, Francie stepped forward and entered the political fray as an elected representative for Sinn Féin. Elected to the Assembly in 2003, he served on the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, reflecting another great passion in his life. A fluent Gaeilgeoir, he was steadfast in his promotion of the Irish language, using it in the Chamber on many occasions.

He established a reputation in the Assembly for his commitment and dedication to his constituents and his native Dungiven, and for the respectful way in which he engaged with Members from other parties. Across the Assembly, Francie was admired and respected for his beliefs.

Aside from politics, Francie also made a huge contribution to the music and cultural world with the songs he recorded and performed alongside his beloved wife, Anne. He was well known across Ireland for his songs, in particular 'The H-block Song', which has become a classic the world over and will live on as a testament to his campaigning, activism and republicanism.

I send my condolences to his widow, Anne, his children Joe, Proinnsias, Conal, Áine and Nodlaig, the entire Brolly family, and everyone who knew Francie. My thoughts are with them at this very sad time. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Mr Givan: I did not have the opportunity to be in the Assembly when Francie Brolly was an MLA. He left at the start of 2010 and I joined later that year, but I did get to know Francie in a different sphere. Francie Brolly, yes, was a committed republican, but he was a committed

republican who held, most importantly to him, the words of the 1916 proclamation of independence:

“cherishing all the children of the nation equally”.

I got to know Francie and his wife, Anne, through the pro-life movement. Certainly, his passing is a loss to the voice in the republican community advocating the rights of the unborn child. When I spoke to his wife since Francie's passing, Anne reassured me that she intends to continue his work on the issue, which was very important to them.

Francie was an unconventional MLA. In a different capacity, I worked with the then Culture Minister when Francie was on the Committee, and I can recall his saying to the Minister, “I have been handed a list of questions that the folks up in the office want me to ask, which is quite awkward. I do not really want to do that. What can I do to be helpful?” As you said, Mr Speaker, he was a free spirit. He was unconventional, and that certainly marked him out at that time when I was engaged with the then Culture Minister, Edwin Poots.

I offer my condolences to Anne Brolly — 51 years of marriage to Francie — to their five children and their 13 grandchildren.

Mr Butler: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I extend our condolences to the Brolly family, to Anne, the children and the grandchildren. It is interesting to hear about the unconventional nature of Francie, whom I did not have the pleasure of getting to know and working with. On that note, we extend our condolences to the family.

Mr Dallat: I have been here long enough to remember Francie during his years here. Let me begin by offering the sympathy of the SDLP, and my personal sympathy, to the Brolly family, and especially to his wife, their children and grandchildren. They were inseparable in life. Francie's death is difficult for many people. How much more difficult must it be for the Brolly family?

In the Assembly, I remember Francie as being a gentleman to everyone. I think that I am correct in saying that he did not enjoy the adversarial nature of this place. I know he was glad to return to his native Dungiven to continue the work that he loved: as already mentioned, the Irish language, music and local history, which the Sperrins are rich in. I also acknowledge his strong views on abortion.

While he may not have been the most enthusiastic patron of this place, he did make an important contribution to it. Perhaps that was to show respect for others with quite different political views. Francie also made good speeches. I encourage younger Members to look them up, because they were entertaining and informative and helped us better understand where Francie stood in relation to party politics as we understand it. He was well above the cut and thrust and point-scoring that, in the past, went on far too often. One speech, if I may mention it, Mr Speaker, was on the future of the Post Office. The Speaker of the day interrupted Francie a few times to point out that he had yet to mention the Post Office. On each occasion, Francie reassured the Speaker that he was coming to the Post Office and continued to deliver one of the finest speeches ever made in the Assembly. The last two words spoken were indeed “post office”, and everyone was happy. The speech was first class, thought-provoking and entertaining, and Francie was not ruled out of order because it did not focus on the Post Office but on life.

Francie Brolly was indeed a Gael, but his style of Gaelige was all-embracing and about bringing people together to agree or disagree but remain friends and share experiences. He was not a bitter man. He did not harbour grudges and, if he could not do you a good turn, he most certainly would not have done you a bad turn. His contribution to life in his native Dungiven was huge and will live on for many years to come. As the new Assembly beds down, it would be useful to emulate Francie Brolly for his modesty, inside and outside the Chamber. Let us remember him as a Gael whose example threatened no one. He was on an important path and road that I hope we are all now on, respecting and sharing each other's culture and all the things that were important to him and the community that he served for many years as a community representative, councillor and, of course, Member of the Assembly. Mr Speaker, may he rest in peace.

Mr Lunn: I overlapped with Francie Brolly in this place for about three years, I came here in 2007 and he left in 2010, but I got to know him. He was certainly a very committed republican but also a lover of Irish culture and language. He was a teacher of Irish, I believe, and an active member of his church in Dungiven, where I think he lived most of his life. He was also a composer and singer, as others have referenced. Whether or not we agree with the songs that he wrote, you still have to admire the skills involved. Not everybody can write a song; believe me, I have tried, and it does not always work. He was a very humorous man. He was good company and good-natured, but the main thing that I remember about him was his consistent and passionate promotion of the Irish language and Irish-medium education. We had a debate here in 2008 about an Irish-medium school proposal in Derry. I looked it up the other day and will read you a few lines of what he said:

“The name of the Irish-medium school in question, Gaelscoil na Daróige, charms me greatly. Indeed, it is so fitting that, if I were the Minister of Education, I would approve the school even if it had no pupils at all.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 32, p92, col 1].

He went on to explain the meaning and derivation of “Daróige”, which apparently has to do with the Irish term for a young oak tree. That is fitting for young pupils growing up; little acorns and all the rest of it. That was Francie. As far as I can remember, he was never rude or abrupt with anybody. He had a gentle approach to what he believed in.

I will leave you with one other entry in Hansard that I noticed the other day. He was called to ask a supplementary question, and he got up and said:

“I am going to ask a question now. I am just trying to think of one.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 26, p16, col 2].

[Laughter.] Along with others, I join the House in expressing our sympathy to Anne and the wider family circle. He will be greatly missed.

12.15 pm

Dr Archibald: I wish to add a few words, from a constituency perspective, to what Michelle said and to add the condolences of our party locally. Francie was an MLA for East Derry from 2003 to 2010. He played an important

political role in our local area as a rights campaigner and in many other campaigns locally, and he made an important contribution on behalf of the constituency to the Assembly. He was also a personal friend to many of us and will be greatly missed. He was known for his love of Irish language, culture and music, and his legacy there will be long-lasting, not just in Dungiven or County Derry but across Ireland and much further afield. He was a key figure in helping to establish Irish-medium schools in Dungiven and the surrounding area, and we are all very proud of the growth and strength of the Irish language.

On behalf of our activists across East Derry, I send deepest sympathies to Francie's wife, Anne, and to his children, grandchildren and wider family circle.

Ms Anderson: In August of last year, at the Belfast Féile, Gerry Kelly and I had the privilege of sharing a platform with Francie, and, whatever one thinks of the songs that he wrote, he sang 'The H-block Song' so eloquently. I stand on behalf of republicans in Derry to extend our sympathy to Anne and the wider family. I attended the wake. It was a very big funeral as well, and we know that their hearts are very sore, as are the hearts of the republican family, on the loss. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a ana.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the tributes to Mr Brolly.

New Assembly Member: Ms Martina Anderson

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that Mr Raymond McCartney resigned as a Member for the Foyle constituency with effect from 3 February 2020, and I notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Martina Anderson has been returned as a Member for the Foyle constituency. Ms Anderson gave the undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered her designation in the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive at 10.30 am on 10 February 2020. On behalf of the Assembly, I welcome the new Member and wish her every success.

Speaker's Rulings

Mr Speaker: Members, I have an additional procedural matter that I wish to address this morning. I will be brief.

I said last week that I was considering my approach to aspects of our business in the House. This week, I will be publishing new Speaker's rulings on Matters of the Day and questions for urgent oral answer. The rulings attempt to set out in more detail, for the benefit of Members, the factors that I will take into account when considering requests submitted to me.

From next week, there will also be a slightly revised application process. The purpose of that will be to provide more information for me, as the Speaker, to understand why Members are seeking to raise the issue and how they think that it meets the criteria in Standing Orders. For Matters of the Day, that means demonstrating that the matter is of exceptional public interest. For questions for urgent oral answer, it means demonstrating not only how a question is of public importance but how it is of an urgent nature and requires being answered that day, as opposed to being answered through any of the other procedural opportunities Members have. The process will allow me to consider better the request alongside the other issues I have to take account of, including the pressure of business in the Chamber on any given day.

It may be worth considering whether our current procedures and criteria are the best way of providing the Assembly with the flexibility to respond briefly to important developments on any given day. Personally, I am attracted to having a short period during which Members have the opportunity to put issues briefly on the record without requiring me to judge them against any particular criteria. Such a change, however, would not just be for me, as the Speaker, to effect but would have to be considered by the Committee on Procedures. I am conscious that the Committee already has a heavy workload in dealing with the issues that could not be progressed during the short 2016 mandate. Reviewing that feature of our business therefore may not be a priority at this point. Therefore, I encourage Members to make use of my new rulings on Matters of the Day and questions for urgent oral answer when they are issued and to seek the guidance of the Business Office before deciding to try to raise an issue under the current procedures.

Business Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

*That Mr Gary Middleton replace Mr George Robinson as a member of the Business Committee. —
[Mr K Buchanan.]*

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Alan Chambers replace Mr John Stewart as a member of the Committee for Health; and that Mr John Stewart replace Mr Alan Chambers as a member of the Committee for the Economy. — [Mr Butler.]

Executive Committee Business

The Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Judicial Pensions) (Consequential Provision No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Mr Speaker: Members, take your ease for a moment. We are waiting on the Minister to arrive in the Chamber.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Judicial Pensions) (Consequential Provision No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

The rule that we are considering today is somewhat technical, so perhaps it would be helpful if I provide —.

Mr Speaker: Will the Minister just resume her seat for a few minutes? There are procedural requirements.

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

Ms Hargey: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle.

The rule that we are considering today is somewhat technical, so perhaps it would be helpful for me to provide a brief background to the regulations. Historically, fee-paid judges did not have entitlement to a pension, and legislation permitted pensions only for salaried judges. Following the case of *O'Brien v Ministry of Justice* and subsequent decisions, it is now established law that a lack of a pension and other specified benefits amounted to less-favourable treatment of some fee-paid judicial pension holders in comparison to salaried judges doing the same or broadly similar work. That was a breach of the part-time work directive.

The Department of Justice made the Judicial Pensions Regulations (NI) 2015 under the Public Service Pensions Act (NI) 2014, which are analogues to regulations made by the Ministry of Justice to implement the pension scheme for future service from 1 April 2015. However, it was also necessary to establish a remedy scheme in respect of past pension service from 7 April 2000.

The date of the part-time work directive ought to have been given effect in domestic law. Following a legislative consent motion passed by the Assembly in 2014, the Lord Chancellor proposed to establish a remedy final salary pension scheme for eligible fee-paid judges in Britain and here for service from 7 April 2000 until 31 March 2015. However, before the Lord Chancellor could make the necessary regulations to establish the scheme, a technical consequential amendment was required to section 31 of our Public Service Pensions Act, in line with the corresponding amendment made by the Ministry of Justice to section 30 of the Public Service Pensions Act 2013 for England, Scotland and Wales. The legislative pension, which empowers the Lord Chancellor to establish the scheme, was inserted by the Pensions Act 2015, and the power to make the requisite consequential amendment to the 2014 Act rests with my Department.

In summary, section 31 of the Public Service Pensions Act placed certain restrictions on the operation of public service pensions, subject to an exception for pre-existing pensions schemes. At the time of passing the Act, the need

to permit the creation of a new but historical scheme of this nature was not anticipated. The regulations provide that section 31 does not apply to the remedy scheme, and so removes a barrier to the scheme being established. Without the regulations, the remedy scheme would not have applied to affected office holders here, leaving the Departments in breach of the part-time work directive. As I said at the outset, all of this is somewhat technical, but I hope that Members appreciate why the regulations are necessary.

Mr Speaker: No Members have indicated that they wish to speak, so I ask the Minister to make a winding-up speech.

Ms Hargey: I conclude by saying that the regulations remove a barrier for the implementation of the suitable pension scheme for fee-paid judges, to mirror the pension scheme of salaried judges established by the Judicial Pensions and Retirement Act 1993. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Judicial Pensions) (Consequential Provision No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease, while we change the Table.

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

Private Members' Business

Abuse of Service Animals

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the invaluable work of service animals used by the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the Prison Service; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to introduce to Northern Ireland a law, equivalent to Finn's law, making it an offence to harm or abuse an animal in the line of duty.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. You will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Easton: Finn's law came about after Finn was repeatedly stabbed in the chest and head on 5 October 2016 during an arrest. The injuries suffered by Finn were so severe that he required four hours of life-saving surgery and 11 weeks of recovery. Finn, for those who do not know, is a police Alsatian.

Under Northern Ireland law, there is no specific offence for causing injury to a service animal while they are carrying out their duties. Attacks on police animals happen daily, but very few are pursued through the courts due to the lack of appropriate offences. PD Finn's offender was charged with criminal damage, which is akin to breaking a window or damaging a police radio. In other words, Finn was deemed worthless.

12.30 pm

All service animals should be recognised for the vital role that they fulfil. Part of that recognition should be the creation of a specific criminal offence of causing injury to them. The fact that the investment of public funds into specific training and licensing of these animals serves to exclude them from the protection of the current Animal Welfare Act is immoral. Many injuries are not followed through to charges, and fewer still go to court and receive any meaningful sentence.

Finn's law is not radical. Specific criminal offences for attacking or injuring a police animal have been created and are enforced in 10 states in the United States. Similar offences are also enforced in Austria, Germany, Australia, Holland, Switzerland, England and Wales, and Scotland. The flaw in the Animal Welfare Act was identified and considered in Australia when it was creating its animal welfare legislation in 2002. The Australians ensured that the protections that animal welfare legislation offers must apply to their service animals. As a result, they included a specific section to ensure that the defence of fear should not apply to service animals or be treated as property.

The Animal Welfare Bill of 2019 — Finn's law — received Royal Assent on 8 April 2019 at Westminster. The Bill amended the Animal Welfare Act 2006 so that the statutory defence of fear that it contains does not apply to any service animal that has been trained to create intimidation or fear. This includes all service animals.

The new Act covers England and Wales but not Northern Ireland, and Scotland has introduced its own laws.

Courageous service animals such as police dogs and horses must be offered greater protection under a new law. The law proposed in the motion would remove a section of the current law of self-defence, which is often used by those who harm service animals. This change, coupled with any plans to increase maximum sentences for animal cruelty offences to five years in prison, will make sure that those who harm service animals are punished accordingly. The campaign in Northern Ireland, which began in April 2018, is to have Finn's law implemented here to also protect our service animals, including police dogs, fire dogs, search and rescue dogs, prison dogs and even guide dogs. The current Animal Welfare Act 2011 must be amended to mirror Finn's law, known as the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019.

A petition has reached over 44,000 signatures from across Northern Ireland, and support and backing has come from K9 Search and Rescue, the USPCA, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), Assisi Animal Sanctuary, Mid Antrim Animal Sanctuary, Lucy's Trust, Tuk's Law, Almost Home, 7th Heaven, the Barn rescue centre, the Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs Home, the Kennel Club plus all the smaller animal rescue centres and organisations across Northern Ireland and the UK.

Under the current law, it is unacceptable that, as a result of the training invested in service animals, they are excluded from the protection offered under animal welfare legislation. This is an obvious wrong that needs to be put right. Finn's law in Northern Ireland will lead to tougher punishment for those who attack service animals such as police dogs, and it will mean that service animals will be protected for their bravery. It is immoral that the law does not protect the animals upon which we place so much demand and responsibility. Those animals give their service with such loyalty and dedication to keep us safe, and the very least that we owe them is inclusion under animal welfare legislation.

Attacks do happen in Northern Ireland. The problem is maybe not as severe as it is in the rest of the UK, but that does not mean that we do not protect them should a serious attack happen. Police dogs have been hit with bottles and other missiles, and search and rescue dogs have also been put at risk. Northern Ireland's service animals must have the same protection under Finn's law. I respectfully ask the Minister to give the Assembly a commitment to bring Finn's law into operation for Northern Ireland and bring us in line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

I wish to say thank you to Bernadette Kelly from Northern Ireland Finn's law, who has led the campaign across Northern Ireland for Finn's law to be introduced. She has mostly been on her own as she met and emailed all political parties to lobby for Finn's law.

Finally, the motion is about the welfare of service animals that put themselves at risk in order for us to have a better society. There is nothing political about the motion and I really hope that all Members see fit to support it. It is a chance for the Assembly to show what it can do collectively, together, for the protection of animals and a better place for us all to live.

Ms Dillon: I support the motion. Service animals play an invaluable role, as has already been outlined, and should

be protected in law from being attacked or abused when carrying out their duties. I am sure that everyone will agree that attacks on these or any other animals are abhorrent. There is no doubt that the loophole in the legislation needs to be addressed, so I call on the Minister to bring forward legislation through his Department to address that and to ensure that these animals are protected in law.

Mr McGlone: I begin by thanking the Member for bringing the motion to the Assembly. It is important that, just as we thank those members of the emergency services for the selfless work that they do every day to keep us all safe, we also acknowledge the immense contribution that service animals make. The proposer of the motion has already given us an overview of the background to the Finn's law proposal and the circumstances of the severe attack on a police dog in the line of duty. It struck a chord with me that, in the aftermath of the attack, the only law that could be enforced against the assailant was that of criminal damage.

It cannot be right that we degrade those animals to the status of personal chattels or objects like a phone or car. It demeans the contribution that they make to our emergency services, and does a disservice to the special place that animals hold in the life of the island. We are known across the world as an island that cares deeply for animals. It should be a goal of the Assembly to ensure that we are also known as a society that legislates for the care and protection of animals. My party will support the motion, and we will support efforts by the Justice Minister to legislate for the protection of service animals.

It has also been a long campaign of the SDLP to introduce additional protections for all animals, whether they are engaged in emergency service work or not. I note that the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs made specific comments on our proposal to introduce an all-island animal cruelty register at Question Time last week. I wonder whether the Justice Minister — I will put it on the record for her — will also give us her assessment of the need for a central register of those who commit crimes against animals across these islands in order to ensure that they are not able to access rehoming services in the future. I know that a number of animal charities would welcome movement on that particular issue.

It is worth noting, too, that the British Government have signalled their intention to advance beyond the original Finn's law and campaign to increase sentencing for offenders who commit violence against animals, particularly service animals. While we are cautious somewhat about tying the hands of the judiciary when it comes to sentencing, the SDLP recognises that there are circumstances where it is appropriate for the Assembly to intervene when sentencing patterns are seen to be unduly light. I would welcome the Minister of Justice's assessment of current sentencing patterns for those who commit violence against animals and outline whether she has any plans to review that area.

I conclude by thanking again the proposers of the motion and encouraging Members present to support the proposals.

Mrs Barton: While the motion, as we have heard, has come about because of Finn's law in England and Wales, as this is a supposed nation of animal lovers it is only right that a motion based on the protection of defenceless service animals be brought before the Assembly.

Hopefully, it will lead to much more than an Assembly motion and will lead to legislation being introduced.

In Northern Ireland, many animals, particularly dogs and horses, are attached to services such as the PSNI, army, Fire and Rescue Service and Prison Service, and carry out extremely valuable work while being guided and trained by their handlers. That could be as part of a customs control operation, searching for illicit substances at docks; helping to rescue people from a house fire; crowd control; or assisting with an operation to catch criminals.

Sadly, in the past, many of you will recollect dogs attending the scene of suspect devices with their army handlers. Unfortunately, the devices often turned out to be live devices, with the handlers and their dogs, unfortunately, making the supreme sacrifice. Those service dogs were on the front line and without doubt saved numerous lives.

Such operations and tasks, from being called out to a rescue on a mountainside to tracking suspects, are completed by our service animals daily. Their work is truly outstanding and greatly complements the regular work of the services.

Unfortunately, however, there is a downside to that invaluable work for the animals. Many suffer physical abuse in the line of duty, particularly in the pursuit of suspects. Dogs are all too often kicked, abused and even deliberately stabbed, particularly when they try to apprehend a perpetrator or when a suspect tries to make a bid for freedom.

Finn, who was one of the most successful police dogs in England, was left bleeding and badly injured after a suspect lunged at him with a 10-inch blade. In the event, a charge of criminal damage was brought against the suspect, but that charge treated Finn as if he were a piece of police property. There was no separate penalty that could be imposed on Finn's attacker for the deliberate attack on the animal.

The reason that we have this motion before us is to introduce into Northern Ireland law the equivalent of Finn's law, which would provide, for the first time, proper protection for service animals and an appropriate sentence for offenders.

In conclusion, I call on the Minister of Justice to make specific provision for the welfare of service animals whose mission is clearly to save the people of this country and community while assisting and supporting a service officer. We therefore support the motion, which aims to protect our service animals. People should no longer get away with deliberately injuring or killing those brave animals.

Mr Blair: I support the motion on behalf of the Alliance Party. I commend those who brought it before the Assembly. I welcome the interest in animal welfare and animal protection. My colleagues and I hope that similar attention is paid and sympathy shown when the House comes to debate other forms of animal cruelty, such as fox hunting and hunting with dogs simply for the kill.

However, this is a welcome endeavour to deal with a serious and outstanding matter of potential animal cruelty. It is appropriate to think about and reflect on the existing Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, and subsequent amendments to it. The Act deals, fairly extensively, with the responsibilities of an owner or keeper of an animal, and it also addresses, to some extent,

deliberate harm that may be carried out by a third party. It does not, however it seems, deal specifically with animals who are trained and deployed to protect the public. We should never take those animals for granted.

Those public-service animals, and Alex mentioned dogs in particular, play an essential public-service role in ensuring our safety. For example, dogs play a crucial role in drugs and arms searches, assist in public-order control and pursue those suspected of crimes — often wicked crimes — against individuals. It is reasonable that we should expect those animals and the role that they perform for our benefit to be recognised and protected in law. I therefore have no difficulty in supporting the motion and offering the Alliance Party's support for it.

12.45 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, Mr Harry Harvey, I remind Members that, as is the convention in the House, maiden speeches are made without interruption.

Mr Harvey: It is a privilege to stand here to make my first contribution to the proceedings of the House and speak on the motion on abuse of service animals. I am humbled to be carrying on the mandate of my predecessor, Simon Hamilton. I pay tribute to Simon and his contribution in the House, and I wish him well in his new role in Belfast Chamber of Commerce. I desire to carry on his representation in the Strangford constituency by being a strong advocate for all in the community, by working tirelessly for them and by helping bring about a brighter future for everyone in Northern Ireland. I also pay tribute to my late father, Cecil Harvey, who served in the House in the early '70s — interestingly, along with Minister Poots's father, Charlie.

I am pleased to speak in support of the motion. I pay tribute to the many service animals in Northern Ireland and to the public servants who train and handle them professionally and respectfully. These animals are used as sniffer dogs in the detection of drugs, in fire and rescue situations to help find people, and horses are used for crowd control. Finn's law affords service animals protection, but, unfortunately, in Northern Ireland, we do not have that legislation. The introduction of legislation to protect these animals will ensure that those who harm them are punished accordingly. At present, if a service animal is attacked or injured, it is an offence of criminal damage, which equates to throwing a stone and breaking a window. That is unacceptable; it is time for this to change.

Animal cruelty is real, and it happens every day. Physical violence, abuse and death are realities for many animals. For a nation of animal lovers, it seems unfair that we cannot provide the animals with the protection that they deserve. Dogs have been known to save their handlers' lives, and some have died carrying out their duties. Our service animals provide essential support in our community and serve with loyalty and dedication to keep everyone safe. It is unacceptable that the law does not protect them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: May I be the first to congratulate the Member on making his maiden speech? As I have said to other Members, to stand up and speak for the first time in the Assembly can be intimidating, but the Member did very well. Congratulations, Harry.

Mr McGuigan: May I be the second person to congratulate the Member on making his maiden speech?

I note the unanimous support, so far, for the motion. The proposer has given the rationale and background to today's motion; he has also outlined the current loophole in the legislation that would see an attack on a service animal classified only as criminal damage. I think everybody agrees that that is unsatisfactory. Cruelty against any animal could not and should not be tolerated and should be punished accordingly. Service animals play a vital role in helping to protect the community. I support the motion in trying to update the legislation to ensure that we offer them the protection that they deserve.

Mr Givan: I support the motion and commend my colleagues Mr Easton and Mrs Cameron for tabling it. It is right that the House recognises the work that is carried out by animals that are in the service of the Prison Service, the Police Service and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. I know that some 64 dogs are currently in the employment, one could say, of the Police Service. I am not sure that they get paid the same as a police officer, but they are there and they provide a vital part of the service. When you see them in operation at events, assisting with public order, you see that they certainly add a deterrent value to those who are staring down the barrel of a vicious Alsatian that wants to make sure that you keep your behaviour is kept in check. It is only right that those dogs are given the protection that they need in order to deter the individuals who seek to inflict harm on those service animals.

I know that, in the Prison Service, dogs carry out a vital role, particularly in the detection of drugs. The little waggly tail that goes profusely when visits take place identifies the attempts to smuggle drugs into the prison, and that happens very frequently. How those dogs are detested by prisoners and those on visitation. They are utterly detested because of their effectiveness in doing their job. To the dog, it is just a game and a bit of sport, and they get well rewarded for it, but they carry out a valuable job. In the last five years, two dogs have been injured in prison. One was injured by a snooker ball being thrown at it during public disorder in the prison. It is only right that that dog should be given additional protection within the law and that a prosecution should be brought against the perpetrator who attacked the animal.

Dogs, in particular — when you go through an airport, you see them going up and down the luggage — play a vital role in trying to detect not just drugs but explosives. Those animals need to be given proper protection. I see how dogs are used very successfully in operations, not just in this jurisdiction. I note that President Trump awarded a medal of honour to Conan the dog. That dog was the only part of the special forces Delta team injured in the operation against the Islamic terrorist al-Baghdadi. The dog chased him down a tunnel, where he subsequently detonated his suicide vest. Only Conan was injured in that operation — no other service personnel were injured — so, rightly, the dog was given special recognition by President Trump. That makes us think about the heroism of these dogs.

We are a dog-loving nation. We love our pets. I have a lovely golden retriever. I would not put it on the front line, because it is afraid of its own shadow. We love our animals, and it is only right that we give them the protection that they need. The AERA Minister is, ultimately, responsible

for this, not the Minister of Justice. I trust that the Minister of Justice will give her full support to the AERA Minister as he, I hope, confirms the desire to bring legislation to the Assembly. There is not sufficient protection in our law in Northern Ireland. There is greater protection in England and Wales; a Bill is before the Scottish Parliament; but there is no specific offence in Northern Ireland's legislation. I say to the Minister: bring it to the House. I ask that the Minister also look at an issue that I see with Finn's law, in that animals are given protection only when they are under the control of police and prison officers. Outside of that, there is not protection for other dogs that are engaged and used by the voluntary sector. The fire service uses dogs from the voluntary sector; they do not come directly from Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. There is, I think, a loophole, and we need to ensure that our legislation is effective, robust and comprehensively provides the protection that is needed for these vital animals that are carrying out a service for all of us in Northern Ireland. I commend the motion.

Mr Dallat: I support the previous contributions to the debate in their entirety. I take the opportunity to add that the welfare of service dogs is important not simply when they are on patrol but, indeed, when they are off duty and when they retire.

I remember, in particular and with great fondness, two dogs that served with the fire service. One was called Storm, and the other was called Ben — a springer and a Labrador. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee at the time, I know that a whistle-blower expressed concern that the welfare of the animals was in question. I am happy to accept that, today, there are no issues about the welfare of the animals while off duty. However, I take the opportunity to ask the Minister to ensure that, at all times, service dogs, whether they are with the PSNI, the fire service, customs or whatever, have the highest standards of accommodation and welfare, because we are now the custodians of animal welfare in all its forms. I certainly would not want to be told that animals serving in our Departments had standards of care and welfare that fell below what we would accept.

I have nothing else to say. What I have said is not to imply that there are issues currently, but there were issues in the past that were not addressed. To this day, I remember Storm and Ben and hope that their lives ended much better than I was told.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister, I remind him that he has 15 minutes to respond. I will then call Mrs Pam Cameron to make the winding-up speech.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): It is good to see so much unanimity around the Chamber on the issue. It is important, and I welcome the fact that it has been brought to the House by Mr Easton and Mrs Cameron. I trust that we can develop it very quickly in the lifetime of the Assembly. In reality, we have only two years in this mandate to get things done, and Members will find that that is a very short time. On this issue, I hope that the Assembly can make a mark for the betterment of animal welfare.

Animal welfare falls to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and we take the issue seriously. The motion calls on me to introduce legislation in Northern Ireland that would offer extra protection to

service animals, similar to that which has been afforded to these animals in England and Wales under the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019, commonly known as "Finn's law". I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the matter. Some Members may not be aware of that law. For those who are not, it may assist if I set out what Finn's law does. It came into effect in June 2019 when the UK Government amended the Animal Welfare Act 2006 in England and Wales to provide specific protections for service animals that had been attacked when on duty. Under the 2006 Act, it is an offence to inflict "unnecessary suffering" on an animal. In determining whether suffering is unnecessary, a number of considerations are taken into account, including:

"whether the conduct which caused the suffering was for a legitimate purpose"

such as:

"the purpose of protecting a person, property or"

another individual. Prior to the introduction of Finn's law, under the 2006 Act, an individual could claim that they were justified in using physical force against a service animal by arguing that they were acting in self-defence.

Let us talk for a moment about the role of a service animal and where it might be. Mr Givan outlined some of the circumstances. Such animals are often in a prison situation, where they could be searching for drugs. Humans cannot actually deliver that, whereas a dog can, so the effectiveness of a dog is without question. However, prisoner violence can also be without question and, on occasions, when prisoners are involved in riotous situations, a dog is put on the front line. We need to ensure that prisoners know that that animal has additional protections and, unless they want a considerable period added to their sentence, they should not touch that animal. It is a powerful message that we put out in that situation.

On the streets, a dog will confront violent criminals. Once again, violent criminals need to recognise that that dog has protection under the law. Identifying drugs on the streets or in airports is a key role. Service animals have key roles in delivering where human beings cannot.

Mr Buckley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: That is absolutely critical in the debate. I give way to the Member.

1.00 pm

Mr Buckley: Thank you, Minister, and, again, I put on record my thanks to the Members for tabling the motion and for the widespread support for better protections for our service animals. The Minister knows that I am an animal enthusiast. Does he share in our thanks for and appreciation of the wide variety of service animals that have played a role in history? I think specifically of the Dickin Medal, which is the Victoria Cross equivalent for service animals. That has been awarded 71 times, and many animals from Northern Ireland have received it.

Mr Poots: Yes. I know that the Member has a passion for pigeons. I congratulate him on his ingenuity in getting the point in that those service animals were awarded that medal during the Second World War. Of course, it went to the pigeons that carried all of those messages and,

indeed, did a fantastic job of getting those messages back home. I congratulate all those involved.

I understand that Finn's law was introduced following three high-profile cases in England where decisions were taken not to prosecute alleged perpetrators under the 2000 Act for the reasons that I mentioned. Finn's law provides that anyone who causes unnecessary suffering to a service animal while it is in the commission of its duties cannot use self-defence as a mitigation. It applies to animals under the control of a police officer or prison officer but not search and rescue dogs and other working animals. Mr Givan has raised that issue, and I will take on board the issue of animals that do not belong to the police or the Prison Service but are provided to key services such as search and rescue; indeed, they provide an invaluable service on that front line. I am also informed that a Bill is before the Scottish Parliament that would provide extra protection for service animals in that jurisdiction.

In Northern Ireland, the welfare of all animals is protected under the Welfare of Animals (Northern Ireland) Act 2011. Under that Act, there is an offence of causing unnecessary suffering to an animal. There are no specific provisions for service dogs, and that means that an individual charged with that offence can argue that they were acting in self-defence and, therefore, were justified in using physical force against a service animal. My Department has been keeping the matter of Finn's law and the position in Scotland under careful review, and some initial steps have been taken to identify the evidence base to take the matter forward.

I recognise the invaluable work of service animals in Northern Ireland, and I assure you that I take the welfare of animals seriously. I am sympathetic to the introduction of extra protection for service animals in Northern Ireland. I can see how being the only jurisdiction in the United Kingdom not to afford that extra protection has the potential to reflect adversely on our reputation as a custodian of animal welfare. Therefore, I will consult the Department of Justice and my ministerial colleague Naomi Long on the issue. Thereafter, I hope to bring forward a public consultation process and, thereafter, bring legislation to the House on the back of and depending on the outcome of the public consultation process. I have little doubt that the outcome will be positive, given the feedback from the House today and our natural instinct to afford good care and welfare to animals. It is not something that goes across one party in the Chamber; it goes across all parties. It is not a political issue; it is an issue of what is good and right and what is the right thing to do. Therefore, I wish to pursue that line and start the process of legislation, which involves all the relevant consultations in advance of that.

Mrs Cameron: First, it is a great pleasure to make the winding-up speech on the debate. I thank all those who took part in the debate. I am also thankful for the level of consensus that we have across the House in supporting the introduction of Finn's law in Northern Ireland.

Anyone who knows me knows that I love animals, especially my dogs. I apologise to those who follow me on Twitter or Facebook, who are subjected to countless photographs of my lovely pups. The thought of anyone being cruel to any animal really pains me, and it is beyond my comprehension how anyone can act in such a fashion.

As a legislator, I want to make sure that Northern Ireland leads the way on the protection of animals.

Service animals are all the more deserving of protection. It is a remarkable and sad statistic that more than 100 service animals have been injured since 2012. Whether it be dogs or horses, those brave animals play a vital role in keeping our society safe, and their lives are often at risk of loss or injury in the line of duty. They are in public service and, as such, ought to receive the protection that we, the public, can grant them.

I turn to some of the comments made by Members during the debate. The proposer of the motion, Alex Easton, talked about how Finn was repeatedly stabbed and about how attacks were taking place daily in some parts, few of which are pursued in court. He pointed to the fact that such attacks are not included in the current animal welfare Act and said that that was immoral. He spoke about how laws elsewhere in the world affected service dogs. He referred to the change in the law at Westminster — Finn's law — and talked about offenders could face up to five years' imprisonment under those charges. He also mentioned the petition in Northern Ireland that has been supported by many charities and has received 44,000 signatures. That is fantastic. He talked about how service animals were currently excluded from protection under the animal welfare Act and argued that Northern Ireland's service animals must have that protection.

Linda Dillon was clear in speaking about protection for service animals. She said that the loophole in the legislation must be addressed. Patsy McGlone said that service animals made an immense contribution and that the criminal damage charge demeaned the animals involved. In supporting the motion, he mentioned his party's proposals for an all-island animal cruelty register.

Rosemary Barton supported the motion. She talked about legislation being introduced in the Assembly and the different organisations that are affected. In particular, she mentioned fire and rescue animals and customs control animals, which are maybe not areas that we naturally consider when we think about service animals, so I thank her for that. She also talked about the types of abuse that dogs often suffer, including being kicked and stabbed. John Blair commended those who tabled the motion and said that he hoped that attention to animal cruelty would be focused on other areas, such as sport. He said that public service animals should never be taken for granted.

Harry Harvey made his maiden speech here today, during which he paid tribute to Simon Hamilton and wished him well in his new role at Belfast Chamber of Commerce. He paid tribute to his late father, who served in the House. He spoke about the lack of legislation currently in place in Northern Ireland to deal with this subject. Philip McGuigan said that animal cruelty should not be tolerated, and we can all concur with that.

Paul Givan talked in particular about police service dogs, of which there are 64 in total. He asked how much they were paid, which was interesting. He said that it was only right that those dogs be given protection. He mentioned in particular the valuable role played by service dogs whose wagging tails detect drugs in prisons. He mentioned how one dog had been badly injured by a snooker ball and raised the subject of dogs at airports that do an incredible job of detecting not just drugs but explosives. He said he

would not put his golden retriever on the front line, as it was afraid of its own shadow, so we will not be submitting its CV any time soon. He also spoke, on a serious note, of there not being enough protection or a specific offence in Northern Ireland and about how dogs being used in a voluntary environment could be another loophole.

John Dallat supported the motion. He referred to Storm and Ben, dogs with the Fire Service, I think, who were brought to his attention in his time on the Public Accounts Committee, and he spoke of concern for the welfare of those animals.

It was good to see the positive contribution of Minister Poots and his commitment to taking the matter forward with Justice Minister Long to ensure that we have appropriate laws in Northern Ireland for the welfare of service animals. He said that animal welfare fell to his Department. He talked about the Westminster legislation that was brought in in June 2019 and the protections that it gives specifically to animals on duty. He also mentioned the Bill before the Scottish Parliament and said that it should be kept under review. We always have plenty to learn from other jurisdictions, and it is good to look at how these things are managed throughout the rest of the world to get the best practice, so that is welcome. He was sympathetic to the introduction of extra protection for our service animals. He alluded to a public consultation that he would be undertaking and said that he would work with the Minister of Justice on this.

It is nice to have agreement around the House. Sentences must reflect the high regard in which we hold these animals. A slap on the wrist is not enough. I encourage the Minister to do as he has alluded and take forward legislation that reflects this and bring Finn's law to Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the invaluable work of service animals used by the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the Prison Service; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to introduce to Northern Ireland a law equivalent to Finn's law, making it an offence to harm or abuse an animal in the line of duty.

NICE Guidance on Fertility

Mr Gildernew: I beg to move:

That this Assembly recognises the serious emotional distress felt by those experiencing fertility problems in our society; notes that the Department of Health has endorsed the 2013 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) clinical guideline on fertility (CG156); commends the efforts of those campaigning for the full implementation of NICE guidance on in vitro fertilisation (IVF); welcomes the commitment within New Decade, New Approach to make three cycles of IVF treatment available on the NHS; and calls on the Minister of Health to implement fully, as a matter of urgency, the NICE guidance on fertility, including making three cycles of IVF available as committed to in New Decade, New Approach.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. As two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes has been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. Before I invite Mr Gildernew to open the debate on the motion, I remind Members that maiden speeches are, by convention, heard without interruption.

1.15 pm

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I would like to state how proud I am to speak as a representative of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, a historic constituency. I have often reflected on how a parliamentarian from our neighbouring island once referred to:

"the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone".

I would like to recalibrate that by saying that I am deeply proud to represent the fantastic people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I am proud to represent those from the engineering and economic heartlands and manufacturing bases from Dungannon to Derrylin, from historic and world-renowned Belleek to historic Benburb, and from the magnificent mountains of Cuilcagh to my own beautiful Branry. I also acknowledge the efforts of my predecessor in the House to represent the constituency, not only because that is well-earned and deeply deserved but because, as many of you will know, I would be in serious difficulty at the home place on Sunday evening if I did not acknowledge it.

I move to the motion. The availability of IVF treatment is an emotive and sensitive matter. It is often a deeply stressful and challenging time for all concerned. There are daily reminders of the problems, and often no way to get away from them; we think of times like Christmas, Father's Day and Mother's Day. People who are desperate to start families do not have access to the IVF treatment that they deserve.

This has been a very long campaign. There have been debates on the matter going back as far as March 2012, when the then Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee brought a motion to the House. Since then, there have been numerous queries on the issue from a broad range of interested MLAs. In response to a question

for written answer, the Health Minister raised not having enough trained staff or the room and space to provide the services. I know that many here will be eager to hear directly from the Minister today on how he plans to overcome these challenges.

The recent paper produced by the British and Irish Governments refers explicitly to the commitment that:

“The Executive will provide 3 funded cycles of IVF treatment.”

I welcome the inclusion of “education and information” in amendment No 2. I believe that that would add positively to the motion and matches the intent and desire to improve health outcomes for all. It is important that we destigmatise and remove any notion that talking about fertility or sex education is wrong.

I also acknowledge the intent behind amendment No 1, which seeks to address a concern relating to current capacity issues and the potential for discrimination against those at the upper end of the age limit. While there may be some concern that this could effectively disadvantage younger people, I accept that it would have merit as a short-term measure. On that basis, we also support amendment No 1.

I now wish to add a few brief remarks as Chair of the Health Committee. On 30 January, the Health Committee was briefed by the permanent secretary and senior officials on health priorities arising from the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ document. The permanent secretary advised the Committee that, even should resources be made available immediately, the Regional Fertility Centre does not have the capacity to start delivering three cycles of IVF treatment to all eligible women immediately. Further to a question from a Committee member, we then wrote to the Department to follow up on the permanent secretary’s commitment to give consideration to whether, in light of the acknowledged limited capacity, the promised three cycles of IVF could be provided outside the North for women close to the age threshold for treatment. The Committee awaits a reply to this query with interest.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I congratulate the Member on having made his maiden speech. Having served on the Communities Committee under the chairmanship of his sister, I can assure him that he would have been in diff’s had the praise not been fulsome, so congratulations.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Insert after “urgency”:

“and with immediate effect for women aged 35 years and up to threshold age of 40,”

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You will have 10 minutes to propose amendment No 1 and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Durkan: I support the motion. The proposer of the motion outlined quite clearly the rationale behind the motion, and I commend those who have brought this very sensitive, emotive and important issue to the House. I had tabled a very similar motion near the end of the last Assembly mandate. Sadly, it never made it to this stage due to the collapse of the Assembly, and we cannot avoid or deny the fact that progress on making three cycles of IVF treatment available on the NHS, as per the

NICE guidelines, has been prevented and slowed down immeasurably due to the fact that we have not been here for three years, but we are here now.

In the meantime, though, I do not believe it is an exaggeration to say that couples and, in some cases, individuals have spent hundreds of thousands of pounds collectively and travelled very far and wide to access treatment and to maximise their chances of conception and of having a baby whom they so badly want and to whom they have so much love to give. People have got into debt through borrowing money, remortgaging their homes and putting themselves under massive financial pressure. As Colm Gildernew said, it is not only financial pressure that people are under; this whole process puts pressure on relationships, as partners blame themselves and sometimes blame each other. Many people who have been or are going through this treatment under the current process have relayed to me their feeling of failure and incompleteness. The detrimental impact of all this stress on people’s mental health cannot be measured but it certainly must not be understated.

In the three years that we have not had an Assembly, however, a lot of work has been done on the issue. I commend, as the motion does, those organisations that have worked so hard to keep this issue on our agenda, to keep it in the public domain and to ensure political support for if and when we were going to get up and running again. I also commend the work that they have done to support people. They are there for people: to advise them, to direct them, to encourage them and to console them. They are there for people at the worst of times, and I have seen that in my constituency. I pay particular tribute, as I am sure Karen Mullan will later, to Fairness (IN) Fertility, which operates in Derry. They have been there at the worst of times, and they are also there at the best of times to celebrate the great news stories that come out of treatment when people are fortunate enough that the stars align in their favour. Fair play to those organisations.

It is my understanding — maybe the Minister will be in a position to clarify this — that, a number of years ago, perhaps in 2016, there had been a planned pilot scheme to move to two funded cycles of IVF treatment. I was not able to find any of that in the information pack, but it is my understanding that that was the case and that it just disappeared from view. I do not know who made that decision, how that decision was made, and I certainly do not know why that decision was made. That would not have gone as far as the three cycles, which is where we want to go as per the guidelines, but it would have certainly been a step in the right direction.

I am pleased to hear that Sinn Féin will support our amendment, which focuses on women who are approaching the upper threshold of 40. It is a short-term measure that we see this prioritisation taking place. Given the contents of the New Decade, New Approach deal, people have had their hopes raised. These are people who have been frustrated for a long, long time, given the nature of what they are dealing with. They have now had their hopes raised, and it is important that we meet those hopes with action, as an Assembly and as an Executive. While the motion will understandably call on the Minister of Health to progress this and to ensure that what is promised in that agreement is implemented, there is definitely a collective responsibility on the Executive to do that. If the

Minister of Health, in this case, comes forward looking for financial assistance from Executive colleagues in order to ensure the delivery of pledges and promises made in that agreement, the parties — which I hope will all support this motion and speak in favour of it today — their colleagues around the Executive table will, hopefully, back any ministerial request.

We have seen it already: New Decade, New Approach promised that the pay parity issue would be resolved. Although we are delighted that it was — at a much bigger financial cost than this, albeit extremely worthy — the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister were all glad to make that announcement alongside the Health Minister. I do not care who makes the announcement or how it is made, and nor will the people out there either, as long as it is made and we fulfil the promises made in that agreement and give them a chance to fulfil their dreams.

I welcome the stated support from the proposers for our amendment. I commend the motion and amendment No 1 to the House. We have no issue with amendment No 2 either; it is in no way contradictory to ours, and it also adds to the motion.

Mrs Cameron: I beg to move amendment No 2:

At end insert:

“, and to implement a fertility education and information programme similar to the Scottish Government’s Your Future Fertility programme.”

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You will have 10 minutes in which to propose amendment No 2 and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs Cameron: Members will note that this amendment in no way alters the main objective of the motion. Indeed, we welcome the motion before the House today and fully support it. I thank Karen Mullan and Colm Gildernew for bringing it to the House. We also welcome amendment No 1 from Mark Durkan and Sinéad Bradley. We recognise the great time pressure for those who are close to the age-40 threshold. I also welcome the fact that that is intended to be a short-term measure.

Our amendment approaches the issue in a more holistic way. I will elaborate further on that rationale later in my remarks. For those of us who have children, there is certainly no greater moment in life than when you carry a child inside you or you hold your baby in your arms for the first time. I count myself incredibly blessed to have three amazing children.

As we look back on our youth, I am sure that many of us recollect saying things like, “When I have children”, or discussing with friends how many children we would like to have. At that stage in life, it all seems so simple, as if it is a right and is one of those things that just happens. For many, however, the reality of parenthood does not come that easily, and, for some, it never comes at all. I know many who have been through the struggle. To say that they have come through the struggle is not right; it remains a case of coping with it each and every day. Like all battles, some cope better than others as the heartbreak of not having the family you always dreamed of becomes the daily reality.

We know that infertility is a taboo subject. In many ways, that is why our amendment adds something really valuable

to the motion. Awareness can be an incredibly powerful tool that can inform our choices early in life, which can help to keep us healthy and, hopefully, fertile. In reality, we probably concentrate more on reducing unwanted pregnancies, especially in our teens and 20s, and do not necessarily consider all the potential impact of our day-to-day living and how that can impact on our future.

I am conscious that some Members may not be aware of the nature of the Your Future Fertility programme in Scotland. I put on record my thanks to Hilary Knight from Fertility UK for briefing me on the topic. I am sure that my colleagues on the Health Committee will hear more from that charitable organisation, which supports those on their fertility journey. That organisation, like many, does terrific work. It is vital that it be funded to continue that work.

1.30 pm

At a high level, the aims of the Your Future Fertility education project are: to provide fertility information and education in universities, to GPs and in the workplace to ensure that people are better informed on all aspects of fertility, including information on how to take care of their fertility and information on how and when it declines; to raise awareness among young people at university of fertility issues and to educate them about the issues that can impact on fertility, such as sexually transmitted diseases and lifestyle choices; to reduce the incidence of fertility problems through improved sexual health and lifestyle outcomes; and to alleviate the effect on those already affected by the illness through providing information, self-help and support at information events throughout Scotland.

When we look at the experience of Scotland since it rolled out the programme, we see that the outcomes have been wholly positive. We lack the specific education provision in Northern Ireland, and many of those in the medical field who deal with fertility issues, mental health and other health provision are supportive of the programme being implemented in Northern Ireland.

The following are quotations from Northern Ireland health professionals regarding Your Future Fertility. Dr Ishola Agbaje is a subspecialist in reproductive care at the NHS Regional Fertility Centre in Belfast. He says:

“Fertility Network’s Your Future Fertility project is an essential public health programme and a real opportunity to educate young people on the impact of lifestyle factors and on their future fertility. There is a lack of knowledge regarding the potential negative effects of factors such as age, STIs, obesity, smoking and anabolic steroids on fertility and an overestimation of the success of treatments such as IVF. Educational initiatives like this have the potential to make a much greater impact on individuals’ fertility health and their choices than treatments alone and should be commended.”

Then we had Martha Campbell, family therapy lead and assistant children’s service manager for the Family Trauma Centre and the eating disorder youth service, which is part of Belfast child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). She is quoted as saying:

“I believe this will be one of the most important areas of development in adult mental health, as we see increasing numbers of couples and women

seeking support in relation to fertility in the future. The emphasis should be placed on early intervention and education in order to support them in their future choices. We in CAMHS would welcome any partnership and support you could offer us in the future years. I look forward to hearing from you and working together as your project develops."

Then we had Dr Ursula Brennan, Mount Oriel medical practice, Belfast, who is quoted as saying:

"Fertility Network's Your Future Fertility project has supported the general practice community to support, educate and influence young people on health issues which will impact on their future fertility. As a GP working in Belfast, I have been aware of the gap in education and learning opportunities for primary healthcare professionals in the area of fertility medicine. It is exciting to learn that this project raised both student and professional clinicians' awareness of fertility issues, including the emotional impact. In the current environment of healthcare redesign and transformation, I am confident that investing in fertility health-related issues will have a positive impact now and in the future."

In recent days, some Members have been accused of not listening to professionals as we attempt to deliver better outcomes for our constituents. Those are the words of professionals that I have quoted, and they state a better case than I can for the programme to be introduced. I hope that the House agrees.

We fully support the aims and objectives of the substantive motion and congratulate the Members who tabled it. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document deals with a vast range of issues, some of which matter to all people and others to specific interest groups. Like many, I was delighted that the document commits the NI Executive to providing three full cycles of IVF. For too long, we in Northern Ireland have failed those on that journey. Across the rest of the UK, huge inconsistencies in provision remain. I firmly believe that there is a moral duty on the Government to fund full cycles of treatment fully and not to leave patients with sometimes huge private bills as a result of funding themselves in order to complete a cycle of treatment. It is wholly appropriate that NICE guidelines be adopted entirely and as soon as possible.

There is undoubtedly work for the Minister to do on the delivery mechanism and on how we meet the demands of that commitment. We know that the capacity of the current provision at the RVH is an issue, and the financial aspect is another consideration, but I ask this: what price is a life? We must also explore whether partnerships are needed with the private sector to ensure swift implementation of this commitment.

Last week in the Chamber, I moved a motion to introduce mandatory autism training for teachers, and that united the House. It was motivated by a desire to help those who need help, and I am glad that, once again, the focus of the House is not on tribal issues but that we are seeking to help those who need help. This is why devolution matters. This is what we can do when we unite and work together, and I commend the motion and the amendment to the House.

Mr Chambers: For far too long, women in Northern Ireland have faced discrimination in the provision of IVF treatment.

The NICE guidance clearly states that a woman should be offered up to three cycles of IVF. It does that for very good clinical reasons. It is just a reality that IVF is not always successful the first time round. The success rates vary with the age of the woman, and, for many women, there is usually a 20% success rate after one cycle of IVF treatment. That means that, for every five women and couples that place so much hope on a one-off procedure, four will not get pregnant after one cycle. That is the heartbreaking reality of fertility treatment.

It is an injustice that the Ulster Unionist Party has long felt needed to be addressed. That is why this party secured the inclusion of this matter in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. On 3 January, almost a week before the final document was published, the Ulster Unionist Party submitted the request to the Northern Ireland Office and the local Department of Finance, and we were delighted to see it in the final document. Whilst it is positive to see cross-party support in the Chamber today for the policy, regrettably the reality is that both Sinn Féin and the DUP previously had the opportunity to move Northern Ireland to three cycles but chose not to make a public commitment.

Of course, the reality is that it will require additional funding, however this is something that the Health Minister is likely already pursuing with the Finance Minister. I am confident that the Minister from the party that secured the commitment, the current Health Minister, will be dedicated to trying to make the key progress. That having been said, a lot of words of support have come from all the parties in the Executive towards addressing the many problems and pressing issues that are faced by the health service in Northern Ireland. I know that my colleague Minister Robin Swann will be working hard to solve all these issues in a timely fashion. However, his job will be much more difficult if the required resources are not made available to him. I have said that there have been many words of support around repairing our health service from other parties in the Executive, but these words must be translated into action. I know that Minister Swann is totally committed to delivering what is required, however he must receive the budget required to enable this delivery.

The provision of this treatment being debated today may not seem relevant to those on lengthy waiting lists for surgery and other treatments, but it is a declaration of hope for people experiencing difficulty in trying to start a family. I am confident that the discrimination towards parents in Northern Ireland in relation to fertility treatment will be addressed by the Department from today, but that hope will only materialise if the Minister is allocated the budget and resources that he will undoubtedly need to honour this heartfelt cry for help and hope. It should be no surprise to the House that the Ulster Unionist Party supports this motion and both amendments.

Ms Bradshaw: I will say only a few words today, but I want to place on record that we support the motion and both amendments. I commend Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the DUP for tabling the motion and the two amendments. I think that, in the round, it makes for a good debate here this afternoon.

The Alliance Party very much welcomed the commitment in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, not just for the very practical aspect of it but because it provides an opportunity for the issue of infertility and difficulties with conceiving to be debated in a public forum. We have

to work towards removing the taboo that women feel and face when they cannot have children.

I also commend the individuals and groups who have campaigned for many years to secure multiple cycles. I refer also to HERe NI — people will know that it is a voluntary organisation that works with lesbians and their families — and its campaign to encourage access to IVF treatment for same-sex couples.

I have friends who paid for IVF treatment out of their own household funds. I know that that puts considerable strain on an already very difficult situation. If we went back 10 years, I am sure that my friends would be absolutely thrilled to be given this opportunity.

My party very much supports amendment No 1. I became a mother at age 27, but I had friends who were giving birth right up until their early 40s. That is part of the growing trend, whereby women are empowered to make decisions, as and when it suits them, based on their family circumstances, professional careers and other factors. The fact is that women are living longer and healthier lives, so it is right and proper that the proposal and programme that comes forward should reflect the NICE guidelines on access into those later years.

Amendment No 2, on the education and information programme similar to the Your Future Fertility programme, is a wonderful proposal, and I very much support it. It feeds very much into the need to empower young women to deal with all matters that relate to their sexual and reproductive health.

Like Colm and other Members who have contributed to the debate, I am conscious of what we have been told at the Health Committee; that, while the Health Department is very much in favour of this as a commitment, the train may come off the tracks if the budget, resources and workforce are not there to deliver it. Like others, I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Easton: Fewer IVF treatments take place in Northern Ireland than anywhere in Britain. In Northern Ireland, women underwent 1,498 cycles, compared with London, the area with the highest number, where women received 16,649 cycles of treatment during 2014. In Britain, a quarter of a million babies have been born as a result of IVF.

In Northern Ireland, publicly funded IVF fertility treatment began in 2001, when the then Minister of Health announced the intention to consult on the provision of fertility services and introduced criteria for treatment in the interim. The consultation began in 2003, and, in 2006, revised criteria that widened access to treatment were introduced. A second review was held in 2008 in response to an Assembly motion calling on the Department to review the criteria that were used to assess eligibility, the ongoing problem with waiting lists and the number of IVF treatments that were available on the NHS, with a view to establishing a more equitable policy. As a result, a regional waiting list for fertility treatment was created from 2009.

In Northern Ireland, responsibility for the commissioning of fertility services lies with the Health and Social Care Board. While the Department endorsed the NICE guidelines, in practice, treatment is limited to one fresh and one frozen embryo transfer. The following criteria apply: there must be a medical cause of infertility, the female

patient must be under 40 years of age when starting treatment, and the female patient should have had no more than three previous unsuccessful treatments. Only patients who are referred to the Regional Fertility Centre after 1 April 2012 are eligible. There are no restrictions on the status of the couple, the age of the man, or the dependent children. Women must be no older than 39 for treatment with donor eggs. The provision of one fresh and one frozen embryo transfer falls short of a full cycle as defined by the NICE guidelines. Storage costs for frozen embryos are publicly funded only for two years after treatment, after which they must be paid for privately.

The former Health Minister acknowledged that the service in Northern Ireland fell short of the NICE guidelines due to the significant cost implications and other ongoing budget pressures but advised that the Department would consider options for further service provision and examine all practical options for improving the service currently offered.

1.45 pm

Across Northern Ireland, one in seven people experience difficulty having children. Greater access to IVF is important. I want to see wider access to IVF treatment on the NHS, with an increase in entitlement to the three full cycles, as is the case in Scotland. Our people need to be supported and educated on the process. Support services are essential to ensure people are assisted at every step of their journey. There is a commitment to provide three full cycles of IVF treatment in New Decade, New Approach.

I support the motion and my colleagues' amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next Member to speak is Jemma Dolan. As this is a maiden speech, it will be heard without interruption.

Ms Dolan: It is an honour to be here representing the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone and to take part in a debate of such importance.

As this is my maiden speech, please allow me to digress a little. I am from a lovely border village called Belleek in County Fermanagh, which is 112 miles away from Parliament Buildings. If I wanted to come here on public transport, it would take three bus journeys. It is actually quicker to go to Galway. I am a proud Belleek woman and a proud Fermanagh woman. I would not change it for the world. I hope to provide representation for my constituents that also makes them proud.

The reason I agreed to stand as a candidate in the 2017 Assembly election was that I felt that there were not enough women's voices in the Assembly. On top of that, there were not enough young women's voices in the Chamber, and, in particular, there were not enough young rural women's voices being heard. This is an issue that affects many women, including women and couples in my constituency. In October 2018, I attended a Fairness in Fertility event in the Long Gallery. It remains one of the most powerful and eye-opening events I have attended. One quote stuck with me: "There is one thing more painful than having a baby, and that is not having a baby".

It is said that about one in six males and females suffer from fertility problems of some kind. With numbers like that, it is a common problem and has been recognised by the World Health Organization as a disease. It defines infertility as an

“impairment of function” and a “disease of the reproductive system”. Infertility is a medical condition, and, as with any other medical condition, it deserves treatment. The importance of funding fertility treatment is also highlighted by the well-recognised and devastating psychological impact that the disease can have. Infertility can lead to stress, anxiety, clinical depression and the breakdown of relationships. It is, therefore, important that service provision should be focused not only on the clinical cycle but on holistic care for the individual seeking treatment. As part of the wider need to address the issue of parity of esteem for mental health, we must take account of the challenges and pressure of undergoing fertility treatment. A range of fertility counselling services is based in Heron Road in Belfast, but, by all accounts, it is limited in its scope, and the opportunity for outreach to parts of the North is limited and often relies on telephone cover. That is not acceptable and is a poor reflection of a regional service.

The former Health Minister acknowledged that the service here falls short of NICE guidelines, which, as far back as 2004, has been recommending that three funded cycles be made available. For me, as a 29-year-old woman, the fact that women aged between 23 and 35 have just a 20% success rate after one cycle hits close to home. However, there is a 60% better success rate if three cycles are completed.

Infertility cruelly removes the choice of having children. Some couples end up spending their life savings trying to complete their family, and some put themselves into serious debt in order to achieve their dream. Adopting NICE guidance will also go some way to improving access for same-sex couples to an important and life-changing service. For many, there will be an urgency in addressing the capacity and staffing issues as the age limit of 40 approaches. I am keen to hear how the Minister will ensure that all those involved can access a full three rounds of treatment in a timely manner. I appeal to the Minister to implement NICE guidance without delay and attempt to give thousands of couples across the North the greatest gift of all.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: This is becoming a bit of a routine for me, but I congratulate the Member on her maiden speech. I wish her all the best as she represents the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Ms S Bradley: I support the motion and thank my colleagues for tabling it. I warmly welcome the fact that we are debating it, because it is, for many, a critical issue. There are few issues in life more important than starting a family and few decisions bigger. I am delighted to speak as the SDLP's health spokesperson on the issue. The expansion of IVF provision in line with NICE guidelines has been a key priority for the SDLP and a recent manifesto commitment. It is one that our negotiators, like others, continued to stress as part of the talks process.

There is no doubt that this will make a tangible difference in the lives of families across the North, one in seven of whom have difficulty conceiving. That is a staggering figure. It is a reality that we talk about mental health and lots of issues here, and this goes deep to that issue. The longing to have a child and the need for support should never be overlooked in the House. Many people have got themselves into huge financial difficulties trying to fund IVF. The private market has the emotional draw for that group of people who have not been able to get IVF through

the health service. People have gone to great lengths to have access to IVF to settle that inward question of whether they can be a mother, a father or a parent, often at great financial cost to themselves. It seems unfair that some people can be ruled out of being a parent due to finances.

It is only right that access to IVF is expanded to three cycles. Our friends in Scotland have shown us that it is not a huge cost to the public purse; it is relatively small. I warmly welcome the inclusion of the IVF provision expansion in New Decade, New Approach. It speaks to the fact that many here are supportive of the issue, and I support Minister Swann in going forward on it. However, we must be realistic. During the recent meeting of the Health Committee, the permanent secretary outlined the commitment to making the three-cycle provision available, but Mr Pengelly also very honestly said that there was severe limitation in resource around the issue. He cited workforce and the infrastructure that is required. That means that, while there is an aim to deliver the expansion of IVF, it cannot be delivered in the immediate term and we may be looking at a time delay. That gives reason to the amendment that the SDLP has tabled. Unfortunately, Mother Nature waits for nobody, and there are sound clinical reasons why women of a certain age group should have immediate access to the service. I recognise that that will put difficulty on resources, but we should be mindful of those women, because IVF is important to all women and potential mothers and fathers who are accessing it.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that the stress and anxiety lead to poor mental health among those who are waiting to be able to be a parent and therefore that should also be taken into account?

Ms S Bradley: Absolutely, I concur with that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Ms S Bradley: We also have to realise that it is private and personal issue and not many people may feel able to talk openly about it. Whilst good advice regarding mental health is always to share and, I suppose, halve your problem by sharing, that is sometimes not easy to do on these very personal issues. I absolutely take the Member's point.

The reason behind the amendment for women in that age threshold is important, but it is worth citing that, whilst the age of 40 has been mentioned, there are clinical conditions under which women up to the age of 42 are considered for IVF treatment, but it is my understanding that those women will be undertaking it for the first time. Therefore, getting into a dialogue about providing three cycles for those up to the age of 42 is probably for a different debate, as we really have to be mindful that a lot of the work, such as the stimulation of ovaries, can go ahead of the actual IVF treatment. I understand that that process can take a significant number of weeks. The woman also needs a break between cycles. We have to take clinicians' best advice on that.

I welcome the motion and both amendments. I encourage everybody in the House to support them all.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, according to my mobile phone sitting in front of me, it is now 13:56.

Question Time is due to start at 2.00 pm, so I suggest that the House take its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Ms Kellie Armstrong.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Mr Speaker: We are about to start with the listed questions.

Carrickfergus Academy: New Build

1. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Education for an update on a new build for Carrickfergus Academy.
(AQO 58/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Education Authority has submitted an application on behalf of Carrickfergus Academy under the recent call for major capital works. That call was issued in September 2019, and it closed on 31 October 2019. This was a Northern Ireland-wide call. All applications submitted under this call are currently being considered by officials and applications which meet the eligibility criteria will be scored in accordance with the published protocol.

As this is a live and, ultimately, competitive process between schools, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on a new build for Carrickfergus Academy at this time. However, it is likely that a major capital announcement of schemes to advance in planning will be made in the forthcoming months.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his response. I appreciate that there is an ongoing process. The Minister understands that the former schools of both Downshire and Carrickfergus College were assured when the concept of the merger was being discussed that they would be prioritised, and that was one of the concepts for which they undertook the merger.

I look forward to hearing the outcomes. The parents, the pupils, the governors and the staff of Carrickfergus Academy are very eager to see this happen. I ask the Minister to do all he can to make sure that that comes forward.

Mr Weir: I am always keen to help facilitate capital build where I can, and there is a good record of having a flow of projects. Particularly with mergers, there has to be a realisation, as we move forward, that a level of priority is given where mergers are taking place or where there is a scheme that aids area planning. If we are to create a joined-up approach in capital build, then fuelling or giving priority to area planning is going to be a critical element.

In this particular case, the Member may be aware that the call that was issued and the criteria that were used for the major capital project preceded the restoration of the Assembly. When the officials are scoring and judging, they have to bear in mind the criteria that were there at that particular point. We cannot retrofit criteria. It is important that schools that get past the gateway check of eligibility criteria are judged and ranked on that. The scoring criteria need to be applied fairly. I will not seek to interfere in any way with those criteria. Hopefully, when we make the

major capital announcement, there will be good news for a range of places. I am aware of the good work that has been going on in Carrickfergus to help facilitate that.

Mr Hilditch: Having been part of the consultation process, along with other stakeholders, parents, teachers etc I know that a number of commitments were given by the Department. When does the Minister intend to give an updated position, or can the Minister guarantee that the needs of Carrickfergus Academy will be met in the meantime?

Mr Weir: As indicated, I hope to make a major capital announcement in the next few months. There is a wee bit more flexibility in capital, as opposed to resource, because clearly the budget for next year has not been set. Capital projects tend to be multi-year by nature, and there can be flexibility of flow between those years. I hope to make an overall major announcement in connection with all the applications relatively soon.

Clearly, irrespective of whether a green light is given to a new capital build for Carrickfergus, that does not negate applications for minor works. As such, over the last three years, about £74,000 has been spent directly on minor works on the junior and senior campus sites. A further eight possible schemes for minor works are currently being assessed. Under the last minor works, a total of 16 applications were set down by Carrickfergus College and Downshire between them. As I have said, there is work ongoing in relation to that. Therefore, there is a realisation that, even when we see particularly successful schools, there is also going to be a certain bridging period, as regards minor works, because, as with any capital announcement, by necessity, even if it is successful, it will take a number of years to happen. We have to ensure that, as much as possible — and within the constraints of budgets — all children, be they in Carrickfergus or, indeed, anywhere else in Northern Ireland, are given the best possible conditions to study during that period.

Ms Bradshaw: Does the Minister agree that all-ability amalgamated schools like Carrickfergus Academy deserve the same high-quality facilities as any other school? How will he deal with the financial pressures in his Department to ensure that there is capital investment across the Province?

Mr Weir: First, all schools, irrespective of the sector that they belong to and wherever the pupils are driven from, need to be treated equally and given a fair opportunity. As I indicated, cases that are driven by area planning and the area-planning solution need to be given a level of prioritisation as we move ahead.

On the budget, there is, as I said, a slightly blank position, as we do not know what next year's budget will be. However, where there is some flexibility, unlike with some of the pressures that have been identified in the resource budget, there is an opportunity. For instance, if an announcement was made about a particular school today, it may be some years down the line before bricks and mortar are put on-site. There is a bit of flexibility about exactly when things happen and in fitting them around the budget.

Unless something falls out of the sky that limits opportunity, I commit that, if I am in post and make an announcement about a capital build, I will make sure that it happens. The only issue will be the timing. I will not give false hope to particular schools. It is important that schools

that are involved in capital builds, whether major capital works, SEP or specific minor works, can move forward with confidence, not uncertainty.

Clifton School, Bangor

2. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's plans to provide additional accommodation and improved facilities at Clifton School, Bangor. (AQO 59/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. He and other Members have been very assiduous in pushing on a number of the schools that will be mentioned today.

The Education Authority submitted an application under the second call to the school enhancement programme on behalf of Clifton School. It was one of the schools that passed what is called the gateway check, so it is eligible. At that stage, 165 SEP applications had been made, across the board. To date, the school has not been announced to advance in planning; however, it remains on the prioritised special schools list. I should highlight that the SEP schools list was broken down into three categories: mainstream primary schools; post-primary schools; and special educational needs schools. Those prioritised lists will remain live until May 2020, and there is, therefore, the potential for a further, final announcement before the list closes.

The Education Authority will continue to undertake statutory capital works at the school through the minor works programme, so it is not simply an issue of whether it gets SEP funding. To alleviate the immediate accommodation pressure, the EA recently converted an unused home economics classroom into a general classroom. The EA will also carry out a survey and inventory of the existing school meals accommodation to inform an assessment for a potential refurbishment of that area.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be fully aware of the challenges that Clifton School has faced in recent years, with increased numbers and a real need for additional accommodation. The school was originally built for 120 children and now over 170 pupils are enrolled. I understand that, as the Minister said, the school has submitted an application for the school enhancement programme. Will that application in any way hinder the minor works programmes that are planned?

Mr Weir: There is a divergence between schools that apply for the SEP and those that apply for a major capital new build. As such, it is one of the two routes that schools can take. The minor works necessary in the school will have already been assessed as part of the SEP application. If, for instance, minor works — I mentioned a couple of those already — are undertaken at the school, that will in no way disadvantage the school as regards the school enhancement programme at present. It will be judged according to where it is on the list.

I am aware that the Member has been assiduous in pressing the issue, and I hope to be able to visit Clifton School in the near future. I am sure that they will all look forward to that.

Mr Chambers: Clifton School is a relatively new build. Did the Department underestimate the school's accommodation needs when the original plans were submitted?

Mr Weir: I am not privy to what the original plans were. There have been various changes in special needs education over the years, particularly in school numbers. While there has been a desire to have as many special needs children as possible in mainstream education, one of the very positive things that we have seen is a better diagnosis of special needs. Also, as the years have gone by, many more children with special needs have been able to be involved in education.

Some children, such as those who go to Clifton School, for instance, are at the high end of special needs dependency. When we look back many years, some of those children, sadly, would not even survive to the age they are today. We should all be thankful for that progress. The increase in identification, however, has led to an increase in numbers, and the school estate has to keep pace with that. While Clifton School is, historically speaking, one of the more recently built special educational needs schools, it is the case that, in terms of the priority list, there are a number of schools in Belfast whose accommodation needs date back many years.

The important thing, as we move ahead on special needs, is that, as much as possible, for those particularly vulnerable children, we provide the best possible facilities that we can. All of us would share in that goal.

Hardy Memorial Primary School

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Education to outline the capital development plans for Hardy Memorial Primary School. (AQO 60/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. Hardy Memorial Primary School is not currently listed for significant capital investment. In order for any school to obtain capital investment, it needs to be selected following a call for either a school enhancement programme or major capital projects. The most recent call for major capital projects started in September 2019 and closed on 31 October 2019. The managing authority for schools, the Education Authority, did not put the school forward under that call. In the first instance, it will be for the Education Authority to decide whether Hardy Memorial Primary School meets the criteria for major works and, if so, to forward the proposal to the Department for consideration in a future announcement.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. What steps does the school need to take to be able to be considered for capital development?

Mr Weir: Hardy Memorial Primary School could be subject to a development proposal, so I may be limited in what I can say directly. Generically, there are a number of schools across Northern Ireland that, in terms of their enrolment figures and their admissions, while they can be very healthy, perhaps reflect a particular historical situation or a set of circumstances that did not actually take place.

That is important, because schools that find themselves in that position can then come up against an artificial barrier, which is that, if they are failing to have or unable to have the level of enrolment, with a gap of about 15% between that and what they are entitled to do, they can find themselves running up against the barrier of the gateway check, which means that they do not count as a sustainable school.

It is for a range of schools that find themselves in that situation to see whether, working with the managing authority, they can submit a development proposal that allows a level of rightsizing.

I know, even from experience simply as an MLA, that, on occasions, schools had maybe an unrealistic figure that reflected a decision taken in the 1970s or 1980s. It is important that schools are not artificially held back from doing that. It would then be for Hardy to engage with the Education Authority on the right-sizing. At the moment, because of the way the numbers work, there is a certain barrier for the school.

2.15 pm

SEN Assessments: Electronic Record-keeping

4. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to introduce an electronic system of record-keeping for special educational needs assessments. (AQO 61/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority is engaged in phase 1 of a small business research initiative procurement process that includes the development and introduction of an electronic system of record-keeping for special educational needs assessments. This phase of the process is due for completion on 31 March 2020. The objectives of the process are to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the use of data to provide a child-centric and insight-driven service for parents, carers and young people with SEN. Be it in education or other fields, we can talk about vast statistics, but behind, for instance, any decision on special needs education, as, indeed, on other issues, we should all remember we are talking about individual children, so it has to be child-centric.

Key metrics of the process will be expected to include reduced time for statutory assessments; reduced costs of administration of those statutory assessments; improvement in the experience of the assessment and review process for parents and service users — considerable concerns have, at times, been raised about that, particularly by parents; improvement in the quality and timeliness of information for service providers; advanced analytics; and an electronic system of record-keeping.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far and welcome his answer. I have spoken to several SENCOs in schools in my area who highlighted the amount of duplication and paperwork required during an educational pathway for a child. What work is being done to share information between the Education Authority and the health trusts during the statutory assessment process?

Mr Weir: The Member is right. There is a desire to look at that, and it is perhaps most acute in special needs education. Across the board, where there is unnecessary duplication — sometimes it can be between different statutory bodies in education or across education — we need to look at how we can roll back and ensure that how the burden can be reduced for parents and schools is almost a separate issue.

Very specifically, on the issue of the health trusts, led by my Department, there is an implementation of improvements to the joint education and health

notification referral and statutory assessment — NRSA — project, which is nearing completion. Many of the key recommendations have been implemented: for example, revised standard templates for the health trusts to record information needed for statutory assessment. The EA and the health trusts are testing a mechanism to securely transfer information between them electronically, because we live in an era of GDPR and, indeed, data protection.

Mr Lyttle: The Education Minister will be aware that serious concerns for the Education Authority's administration of special educational needs led to an internal audit. Does the Minister believe that that is an adequate approach to investigating those concerns, and will he update the Assembly on that review?

Mr Weir: I understand that the audit has reached completion. It will be shared first of all, I think, with the Education Authority board. I hope to receive that fairly soon.

It is important, in terms of processes, to get this right. While much of that is directly for the EA to implement, as a Department and as a Minister, we want to make sure that all provisions are made and lessons learned for our special needs children and particularly for their parents. All of us as MLAs will have experienced the frustration of individual parents and throughout our constituency. Whatever the audit comes back with, if there are key recommendations, it is important they are implemented swiftly, so that we are not faced, particularly when it comes to the placement of children with special educational needs, with another summer of difficulties when records appear to be lost and there is inadequate communication. It is a time of high stress when a family is looking at where their child will be placed for their special educational needs. It about getting the substance right but also ensuring that the communication strategy is right.

Ms Mullan: Given the concerns raised and the sensitive information about children that is recorded in special educational needs assessments, how will the Minister ensure that any introduction of electronic record-keeping is compliant with data protection safeguards?

Mr Weir: The Member raises an important point. The work that is being done between the EA and the health trusts to trial this and ensure that what they have is fit for purpose has to be on the basis that the information is secure. The EA and the health trusts are testing the secure sending of this before it goes live. All documents used to collate and share information relating to statutory assessment have been amended to include explicit parental consent — there is no point in going ahead with any sharing of information unless it is with the buy-in of parents — and ensure that they are GDPR-compliant. While explicit consent will be a choice for the individual parents, the process will mean that there is a better sharing of data and hopefully a more timely, more efficient and better process. Once the testing has been done in respect of GDPR, I will urge parents to give their consent, but that is obviously a choice for each individual parent.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. I welcome news of the new electronic system, which sounds like it will increase the speed with which assessments are carried out. However, will the system have more agility or flexibility than the current system, so that, as children's needs change, so does the support that they receive, without their having to go right back to the start?

Mr Weir: To be fair to the Education Authority, it has introduced a couple of digital systems recently, the trialling of which has actually worked out quite well: for instance, the checking of eligibility for transport worked well. It is important that there is that level of agility. If we are talking about the digital system, the agility is largely about the transfer of information. The information can transfer, but it is important that we have a wider level of support and protection for special needs education. This will also feed into the new SEN framework, which I hope to consult on in the spring. It is important that we have adaptability. One of the problems that there has been in the past is that a particular assessment is done on a child and then it becomes a fixed point, effectively. That sometimes gives assurance to people, but it can also mean that what we have is not up to date with what is required. Hopefully, the flow of secure information can make the system a little more agile; it certainly cannot hurt. Hopefully, it will also mean that, in respect of special educational needs, we can look at more tailored interventions and, indeed, perhaps earlier interventions. In the past, there has maybe been a little bit too much of a one-size-fits-all approach.

Academic Selection: CREU Report

5. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's response to the report from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU), which found that academic selection has significant detrimental social, educational and economic consequences for pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. (AQO 62/17-22)

Mr Weir: I was wondering how quickly academic selection would come in. There has been much controversy over language in the last months, so it is perhaps a risk to introduce a fourth language into the equation, but there is a little bit of, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose", from the Member. As nobody has earphones, I should say that that translates as, "The more things change, the more they stay the same". While the report has not been formally submitted to the Department, the findings will be considered. I note that the report talks about further research to develop bespoke solutions. That underlines the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to establishing an expert group to establish the link between educational underachievement and socio-economic background, and it is vital that we take the opportunity to explore that.

The Member will be aware that there is a wide range of views on academic selection. It may be that the Member and I do not quite have a simpatico view on the benefits or otherwise of academic selection. I support the right of schools to use academic selection. Our system has to ensure that it has opportunities for all. When looking at educational underachievement, I consider one of the problems to be that there is sometimes too much of a focus on what happens precisely at 11. Critically, if we are to make big differences when it comes to educational underachievement, a lot of the focus has to be on early interventions. To be fair to the Member and his predecessors, that has been realised for many years and been implemented for many years. Early interventions are the critical bit, because, to some extent, if a problem is persisting at age 11, there is a good argument that we have not really sorted out the problem. I look forward to many

fine engagements with the Member in his now elevated role of Chief Whip of the party opposite.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for his response. Even without my 11-plus, I understood what he said at the start.

I have no doubt that the Minister believes in evidence-based policy, and, when all the evidence points you in one direction, there is a responsibility on Ministers across the board to make the right decision. When the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission, the four teachers' trade unions, the programme for international student assessment (PISA) and much other international research tell us that the 11-plus and academic selection is bad for your education system, there is a duty on the Minister to follow that evidence. Does he agree that it is time to bring academic selection to an end?

Mr Weir: I could hurry on to other questions by simply saying no. In my experience, academic selection is an argument that, in this jurisdiction and across other jurisdictions, has been raging for 50 or 60 years. There is unlikely to be a level of consensus on it. I take a view that we should compare academic selection with the likely alternative. For instance, across the water in England, there is a system of public schools — private education — where those who are wealthiest are effectively able to buy the best education. There are those who look for schools that will provide a particular education and judge areas where the house prices go up as possibly having the best schools. The alternative is therefore selection by wealth. Whatever the flaws are with academic selection, by comparison, the system across the water drives a much more unequal society.

If we look at the intake in our universities, we will see that we have a much more diverse level of social mobility than in other places. We have seen a steady rise in the success rate of those on free school meals, for instance. We have a system in which, last year, non-selective schools outperformed the average in Wales and, indeed, are ahead of the OECD average. While there could be criticisms of our current system, there is a lot of success to be celebrated as well. If we simply view educational underachievement through the prism of academic selection, we will have missed a trick.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, in 2016, not long before this place fell, you took the unilateral decision to reintroduce transfer-test coaching to primary schools. Can you provide an estimate on how much primary-school teaching time has been spent on transfer-test coaching in the past three and a half years?

Mr Weir: I appreciate that the Member is somewhat new to this place, but he may find that my decision was effectively the reverse. Guidance was issued by the Department to schools that essentially said, "You are not to do anything that prepares up". What happened was that it became a certain level of false prospectus, in that some schools were providing coaching but, perhaps, not letting the Department of Education know, while some were abiding by the guidance. I actually said that I was leaving it up to the schools to decide.

The Member mentioned coaching. Where there is a ban in place on doing any preparation in schools, coaching will still happen, but, again, it will be those who are in the best position financially to afford it who will get that coaching.

What I said was intended to try to produce, to a certain extent, a more level playing field, and it was also done on the basis that, whatever was happening, it was not to be to the detriment of the curriculum being provided in primary schools.

Mr Speaker: I call Kellie Armstrong for a very quick question and, hopefully, a very quick response from the Minister.

Ms Armstrong: It will be very quick. Thank you very much for your patience, Mr Speaker.

There is an increasing body of evidence against academic selection. Can the Minister of Education cite any specific independent research in favour of the suitability of academic selection?

2.30 pm

Mr Weir: I judge it by the pragmatic success story that our schools have been. Northern Ireland has continually achieved the highest results at GCSE level. Less than 1% of our pupils leave without any GCSE qualifications at all. We have seen a steady improvement in the results of pupils on free school meals; indeed, the gap is closing. As I indicated, even for non-selective schools in our system, the results are higher than the OECD average and the average for Wales. The proof of the pudding is very much in the eating. The reality is that we are not living in some utopian type of system. I note that the Member, therefore, wants to see the abolition of grammar schools. If we were to do so —

Ms Armstrong: [Interruption.]

Mr Weir: Sorry?

Ms Armstrong: All ability.

Mr Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Weir: Well, it would be [Inaudible] but I appreciate that the Speaker has —

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

Autism Training: Trade Union Discussions

T1. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Education, in the light of last week's motion on autism training for teachers and classroom assistants, which was supported by all sides of the House, whether he will consider entering into discussions with the unions. (AQT 41/17-22)

Mr Weir: I do not in any way want to enter a turf war, but there seems to be a little bit of divergence in the particular positions of the unions; The NASUWT and the Ulster Teachers' Union seem to come from quite different positions. I will work with all the stakeholders to try to ensure that we implement the best possible provision of autism training. If we could get the teaching profession to speak with one voice, that would be helpful as well.

Obviously, the challenges are there as to how we best put it in place, both in initial teacher education and, given some of the expertise out there, in rolling it out to the present teaching workforce so that we ensure that all our pupils get the best possible provision for and awareness of autism in particular.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for the answer. I appreciate the position of some of the unions. Will the Minister seek funding for any scheme that he wishes to introduce in the future?

Mr Weir: I am always keen to seek any form of funding. If the Member opposite can have a word with his constituency colleague for Newry and Armagh, the Finance Minister, I would greatly appreciate any assistance that can be given.

There are opportunities. As we move towards an SEN framework, the training of teachers will carry a price tag with it. I think that we could create something that is integrated. I think that I mentioned in last week's debate that work also needs to be done on initial teacher education. That will require the cooperation of not just the Department but the Department for the Economy and the teacher training institutions. From that point of view, while the Department sets the numbers and can give a level of direction, the details of the curriculum, ultimately, will be set in conjunction with the teacher training bodies. Ultimately, if there are additional costs, they will probably be borne by the Department for the Economy. If we are to do something, it cannot be done a shoestring; it has to be fit for purpose. I am very keen on any additional resources that my Department can get. I think that I said last week that the one thing that you can pretty much be sure of in education is that, if money is there, it will get spent.

PEACE PLUS

T2. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Education, albeit that he was sorely tempted to return to the subject of academic selection, whether he will engage with the PEACE PLUS programme for shared education and other departmental programmes that receive funding from the EU Peace programmes. (AQT 42/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am happy to engage with any particular programme. There can be great value in shared education and other activities. As such, despite Brexit, there will be opportunities for that level of cooperation. Looking at some wider context, when a new Government emerge in the Republic of Ireland, there will be certain cross-border aspects that we will need to look at as well. I am very open-minded about trying to engage in any shape or form to build on those experiences. Again, if there are any routes by which additional funding can be levered in, I am very open to them.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister has to be concerned about the significant amounts of money — I doubt that he has the figure in front of him; he can supply it to me another time — that come from EU funding programmes into the Department of Education, which we are about to lose. Has he factored in how he is going to replace those programmes or how the Department is going to operate without them?

Mr Weir: We can get the detail of the exact amounts. On the direct inputs of those funds into the Department of Education, we tend to be at the lower scale compared with some other Departments. Obviously, there will be engagement with the Executive and the UK Government on where we can find additional funding and where there will be replacement funding. One of the bonuses of Brexit will be the opportunity for the Northern Ireland Executive to receive additional funds that might otherwise have gone

to the EU. We have to make sure that those funds are spent in as appropriate a manner as possible.

School Administration

T3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to review the overall administration of our schools and put more money into front-line teaching, given that, last year, the three main teaching unions gave a presentation to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at which they said, "Few educationalists would disagree that our system has an enormous body of staff who do little more than check or regulate other staff" — in other words, micromanaging. (AQT 43/17-22)

Mr Weir: Certainly, there is a priority to ensure that what is there is for front-line teaching. Where there can be efficiencies, part of the bid for next year, as it was for this year, will be around where voluntary redundancies can happen in administration.

Whatever level of budget there is, there is a priority to put the maximum amount into front-line services. Perhaps rightly so, the majority of the money within the Department of Education goes directly into teachers' salaries and the clear majority goes directly into schools, so to some extent, whilst there are efficiencies that can be driven from the system, and this is one aspect that will need to be looked at in the wider review of education, I am not convinced that there is a large pool of money. If it was easy for it to be drawn down, that would have been done by now.

Certainly, any places that can make efficiencies will be looked at, because, roughly speaking, about 80% of the overall cost of education is from salaries. I will direct as much of that as possible to front-line services, and sometimes that will mean that difficult decisions need to be taken.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister consider the fact that our classroom sizes are the highest across these islands? What measures can he introduce through the review to address that?

Mr Weir: It depends a little bit, because I have seen some statistics, but I am not sure that they are particularly accurate. As with any set of statistics, you can question their variable base. I can only reiterate that I will try to ensure that, as far as possible, front-line services are delivered within the budget.

One of the issues we probably have with classroom sizes is the high variability in our system. Sometimes, we see several year groups being taught by one teacher, particularly in primary schools, which is not a particularly good thing. Also, in post-primary schools, we sometimes see circumstances in which the full range of subjects cannot be provided. That is part of a wider reform agenda. At times, that will require a driver to ensure that we get the best possible results for our children. Sometimes, that can lead to certain levels of efficiencies, but efficiencies do not come with an easy button to press; that will require a level of change, which will be a challenge to all of us across the House.

Teachers: Pay and Conditions

T4. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education, given that he will be aware of the significant impact of ongoing teacher industrial action and the New Decade, New Approach commitment to urgently resolve the matter, to

state how he is working with the Minister of Finance and the UK Government to secure the finance necessary to implement fair teacher pay and conditions, as agreed in 2019. (AQT 44/17-22)

Mr Weir: If this was pantomime season, I would be tempted to say that the genie has just appeared from across the Chamber in terms of the Minister of Finance. I will be working with the Minister of Finance and the rest of the Executive as part of the broader budgetary process. There will be an opportunity in roughly a week's time to meet on a one-to-one basis with the Minister of Finance.

The Member is right to mention pay and conditions, because there is sometimes a pure focus on one without the other. I have had a very good meeting with the unions since I have been in office, and I indicated that, at least on the 2017-19 phase, there is largely agreement on something that is, to borrow from our Prime Minister, oven-ready. All we need is the direct finance to do that. I indicated to them that, if sufficient finance is there, I will move on that very quickly. It is important to get a level of industrial harmony. Arising out of that will also be a range of work streams looking at conditions, and there are opportunities to have win-wins. Changes need to be made on issues around administration, inspection, substitution etc. Without prejudicing anything in the work streams, I will be looking to see how quickly we can move ahead with those things. If something good can be done, the quicker it is done, the better.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his update. How confident is he that he will secure the finance necessary to guarantee fair teacher pay and conditions, and is there any threat of an escalation of industrial action if, indeed, he does not secure that finance urgently?

Mr Weir: I do not want to overhype things. If we are in a situation where things are resolved, that produces a positive way forward. If they are not resolved, there is always the risk of escalation, so the Member is right to highlight that. The question of how confident I am about securing resources might be better directed to the Minister opposite.

Project Stratum: Rural Schools

T5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has any plans to ensure that, with the roll-out of Project Stratum, schools in rural areas will benefit from improved broadband connectivity. (AQT 45/17-22)

Mr Weir: The direct detail on the broadband strategy, which I think schools can benefit from, is ultimately being driven by the Department for the Economy. Indeed, it is important that promises that were made on the investment in broadband infrastructure are delivered on by government centrally. As I said, the detail of the roll-out is a matter directly for a different Department, but improved rural broadband will have a very positive impact on our schools. I have visited schools and seen, quite often on some of the digital skills and the use of good broadband, very intelligently used teaching techniques to make use of electronic devices.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give us an assurance that he will consult with his colleagues in the Department for the Economy on Project Stratum? Will he also give us an assurance that the

Education Authority will be sufficiently funded so that schools will be well placed with additional IT resources to deal with the anticipated improved connectivity?

Mr Weir: As I said, we need to make sure that we are well placed on connectivity. On the 14-to-19 strategy, for example, I will be looking to work with the Department for the Economy. Issues around early interventions, for example, are sometimes cross-cutting between Health and even Justice or Communities. Mental health issues in schools are also cross-cutting. Therefore, a lot of this requires joined-up thinking and joined-up work. I will be very happy to work on the broadband issue with my colleague and, indeed, with other Departments to help to deliver that.

Bullying in Schools: Section 75 Groups

T6. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Education whether he will amend schedule 3(3) to the Addressing Bullying in Schools (Northern Ireland) Act 2016 to reflect section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to ensure that schools report bullying across all the section 75 groups. (AQT 46/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is important to deal with any bullying incident from whatever source it comes. When the previous Minister brought in anti-bullying legislation, I was Chair of the Education Committee, and I think that it is important that all incidents are recorded.

Perhaps the Member has the legislation to hand. Mention is made in the legislation that, essentially, the bullying incident would be recorded as well as its nature and cause. My view is that bullying is wrong no matter from what source it comes.

The next step, I suppose, before we look directly at any forms of amending legislation, is that there would be consultation soon on how we actually implement the legislation. The Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum has drawn up guidelines that are in a position to be rolled out fairly quickly. There have been some problems with rolling out the training on that that, to some extent, have been a by-product of industrial action in some schools. Alongside a desire to ensure that industrial action is brought to an end, we should get the requisite training for all our teachers on preventing bullying, because, from whatever source, whatever motivation and whatever false prospectus anybody uses for bullying, whether it is in school or outside school, it is wrong. It is a very clear-cut message. We heard that across the Chamber, particularly from our young people at the event on Friday.

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, time is up. We move on to questions to the Department of Finance.

2.45 pm

Finance

Vehicle Test Centres

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will commit to working with the Minister for Infrastructure to ensure the necessary finance is available to enable vehicle test centres to resume testing services. (AQO 70/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The detail of the situation with vehicle testing is a matter for the Infrastructure Minister. I am aware that she has commissioned an urgent external expert assessment of the steps needed to return the MOT centres to a position where a full testing service can be delivered. My Department has provided support with the procurement of that external expertise. The work commenced on 3 February, and, until such times as that assessment has been undertaken, it is not possible to determine the extent of any repair or replacement programme or associated costs.

It is worth pointing out that the DVA is a trading fund, which allows it to hold reserves to fund planned investment. In the first instance, any necessary expenditure can be funded from those DVA reserves, although that may have an impact on the DVA's future capital in new and refurbished test centres, and we will need to consider that in due course.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he accept that it is serious issue and that it is important it is addressed as soon as possible?

Mr Murphy: Yes. I concur with that. I have had conversations with the Infrastructure Minister. She is clearly waiting to see whether what is needed is a replacement programme, which is capital expenditure, or a repair programme, which is revenue expenditure. Certainly, I will want to do all I can to help her once she has come to the conclusions she needs to come to.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, can you give us any information on whether there are any more unexpected spending pressures relating to unresolved issues from the three years of Stormont hiatus?

Mr Murphy: There are no shortage of spending pressures, as the Member will well know, hence the reason that we continue to have discussions with Treasury on the funding commitments in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, to try to secure the necessary resources to meet some of those pressures. That dialogue will continue. I have been clear about the challenging budgetary situation that we face. I will bring a Budget to the House in the next number of weeks, and Members will have an opportunity then to debate it in full.

Mr Beggs: Given the legal aspect involved, will the Minister also review the contracts of those who were responsible for maintaining the equipment in MOT centres and failed to spot the flaws that have caused such disruption?

Mr Murphy: It will be a matter for the Department for Infrastructure to review its contracts. First, we want to assist it in providing some expertise to do the analysis. Once that analysis is done, as I said, depending whether it takes us into a programme of replacement or repair, obviously, there will be the question of the finance to do it. The DVA should have some of that, and other finance may come to us. I think everybody is agreed that we want to get the situation resolved, however that might be and whatever the future implications are for contracts in MOT centres. We want to ensure we get the system back up and working again as quickly as we can.

Mr Lunn: Unfortunately, my question is similar to the last one. I want to ask the Minister about liability for this fiasco, as I call it. It seems astonishing that all those lifts should

have failed at the same time. I wonder about the inspection regime, how old they were and who supplied them. Is there any possibility of recovering money so it will not cost the public purse a fortune?

Mr Murphy: As I said in my initial answer, the Minister for Infrastructure has instigated two separate investigations. I hope that some of the questions that he and the previous Member have asked will be answered in those investigations as to how we got to this situation and what the consequences are for contracts, liability and whether there is any ability to claw back and make people answerable for the service that they ought to have provided.

Mr Carroll: I am not sure if the Minister is aware that the Minister for Infrastructure said this morning, in a written answer to a question from me, that there are no plans to bring outsourced maintenance of DVA equipment in-house. Does the Minister share the view of his Executive colleague?

Mr Murphy: I am not aware of her plans. Obviously, I am not across a written answer that was given to you this morning. I almost feel like I am in my old job as Regional Development Minister; I am answering questions about infrastructure. Clearly, it is a matter that she will have to deal with. I presume that, when she has the results of both the investigations that she has set out, she will bring them to the Assembly, the Committee and the Executive, and then we will take decisions.

Rates: Transitional Relief Scheme

2. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance whether a transitional relief scheme will be put in place before non-domestic rates bills are issued for the financial year 2020-21. (AQO 71/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Frequent revaluations are in line with policy directions already set by the last two Finance Ministers. Also, business organisations have long called for frequent and regular revaluations. At the last revaluation, in 2015, transitional relief was not considered necessary, even after a period of 12 years, so it would be difficult to justify it now after just five years. The transitional relief scheme that operates in Britain delays the decreased liability for those whose bills go down, as well as the increased liability for those whose bills go up. Any scheme which only worked in one way, suppressing any increases, would be very difficult to justify financially, not least alongside the very many other competing priorities facing the Executive. Therefore, I have no plans to implement a transitional relief scheme for 2020-21.

Mr Muir: The Minister will be aware of the impact of Reval 2020, particularly on the hospitality sector. I ask the Minister to outline what other measures he is considering to assist those businesses? The rises that have been effected to some organisations could result in closure. It is important that the Minister outlines what measures are being considered to assist the businesses affected by this.

Mr Murphy: I am aware that any reval will throw up people who are satisfied. I think some 75% of retail properties will see no change or a decrease in valuation. Obviously, those who see an increase, particularly those in the hospitality sector, have an opportunity to challenge and make an appeal to Land and Property Services (LPS). There is also

a factor, particularly in relation to the hospitality sector, where there is a need for information sharing with LPS about turnover. I appeal to people in the hospitality sector to do that as quickly as they can, because it allows a more accurate assessment of their rates liability.

Generally, there are small business rate relief schemes for businesses, but I understand that businesses are struggling. The economic circumstances are not good, and that is why there was a significant consultation undertaken last autumn. The results are being analysed by me and my Department, and we will make decisions and bring those to the Executive in the coming time.

Mr Frew: Yes, it is correct that we should do revaluations more often to allow businesses to change in a smaller way. Given the fact that some in my constituency could well see rate increases of 600%, is it too soon to roll out a transitional relief scheme? Could it be used in order to remove the shock and trauma that businesses will face if they experience increases like that?

Mr Murphy: Again, I am not aware of the specifics that the Member mentions. I will say that there are significantly more businesses that have either no change or a reduction than have an increase. Now, if there are people who have substantial increases, they should engage with LPS. If it is people in the hospitality sector, there are agreed methodologies that use evidence from receipts and expenditure in order to come to a fair assessment of rental value. It is the rental value that is used for the rates bill. I appeal to people who are suffering as you have outlined to engage with LPS. We have conducted a review and consultation. It was an extensive consultation, and it was well responded to. That has given us much information to allow us to make an assessment. However, businesses that are suffering what they consider to be a very substantial increase need to engage with LPS to see how that can be worked through.

Mr Catney: The hospitality trade can be fickle, and those who find themselves invested in their premises will find themselves much levied upon. I agree with what Mr Frew said about increases in the sector. There must be a fairer methodology available to look at the rates, Minister. I, for one, am not sure that the current rating system is fit for purpose. I hope that the Minister will agree with me and look at ways in which to change it to make it fairer.

Mr Murphy: There are standard methodologies for assessing rental values for properties. There are different valuations for some in the hospitality sector, and, as I said, people can use evidence of receipts and expenditure to come to a fairer assessment. There has been a fairly low uptake in providing that type of information to LPS. I understand that people in the hospitality sector have good and bad times. They have quiet periods of the year and, like all businesses, are struggling. I encourage those who face particular pressures to engage, with the full information required, in order to get the fairest possible assessment of their rate liability.

Mr Nesbitt: Given that the draft Programme for Government targets the promotion of “longer, healthier, more active lives”, notwithstanding rates relief in the sports sector, how do you square that with NAV increases of 30% to 40%? Belfast Indoor Bowls Club has gone up 30·35%; Banbridge Rugby Football Club has increased by 42·16%;

and, perhaps, close to the Minister’s heart, the Athletics Grounds in Armagh has a 21·75% NAV increase.

Mr Murphy: I understand entirely. As a visitor to the Athletics Grounds, I get asked about those matters. Properties such as sports clubs are rarely rented, so an indirect approach has to be found to establish a rental value. There is a substantial sports rate relief programme. Any part of an overall facility that is used solely for sport can get up to 80% relief, which means only 20% of the rates bill is being paid. If there is a social club or another use with a more commercial outlook, the facility is subject to full rates.

I get it. We want to encourage more people to be active, but, where they use premises or facilities purely for sports, they are entitled to substantial rate relief.

Non-domestic Rating System: Review

Ms Kimmins: I congratulate the Minister formally on his appointment. I am proud to call him my colleague. I know that he will do a formidable job.

3. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Finance when the review of the non-domestic rating system will be completed. (AQO 72/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for her kind words.

The public consultation closed towards mid-November with very valuable feedback from the public meetings and the 239 written responses received. My Department is in the process of briefing me fully on the business rates review. I want to establish what short- and medium-term policy objectives are available to us as an Executive in the context of the overall Budget.

Ms Kimmins: I know that there is an urgent need for reform of the rating system, particularly for businesses. It is strongly felt in my Newry and Armagh constituency. Will the Minister also review domestic rates?

Mr Murphy: The question of domestic rates will be part of the Budget programme and Budget legislation that we bring to the Executive, because all of those things will have to be considered in the round to meet the Executive’s requirements. Rates is one of the few financial levers that we have to bring in money to provide for services that are very much under pressure across health, education and elsewhere. All of that will be in the mix. We will take propositions to the Executive for decisions that will then be reflected in the Budget legislation brought to the Assembly.

Ms S Bradley: Has the Minister considered adopting a rate relief system for independent retailers, such as that which exists in England?

3.00 pm

Mr Murphy: We will consider all options. As I say, there has been a very substantial consultation. There was particular interest in the Back in Business scheme that provides support for new and emerging business. A lot of support was expressed for a scheme such as that to be reinstated, and I will look at that. The consultation, as I say, was quite extensive, and quite a lot of issues were thrown up during it. I intend to try to study that. The objective of this is to try to bring the fairest possible rates proposition that the Assembly and the Executive can then agree and to ensure that, in doing so, we try to keep businesses

viable and town centres economically active. I am happy to look any schemes that may contribute to that. I know that Back in Business received particular attention during the consultation.

Ms Sugden: To determine the net annual value of business properties, Land and Property Services is required to gather data from the various businesses. Is the Minister content with the recent gathering of data that will determine the most up-to-date valuation list? If that could be improved, it might reduce the number of appeals that businesses are expected to bring forward.

Mr Murphy: As I say, there is a standard methodology used for assessing businesses. There are other methodologies used for the hospitality sector and that. If people are not satisfied with their valuation, by all means, they should contact LPS and challenge it, if they feel that the increase from the revaluation exercise has been too much.

I remember being on the Finance Committee previously, and we were very critical of the Department because it had taken 13 years to do a revaluation exercise. That meant that rateable values shot up through the roof, and people got hit with a fairly substantial rise. There is an attempt to do them over a more frequent period — over five years — to make sure that they do not have that type of increase. If businesses or properties are finding that, by all means, they should engage with LPS and try to get a reassessment.

Mr Givan: In reviewing the non-domestic rating system, will the Minister outline how he engages with local government, in particular the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, on its setting of the rate? Although that may be more a question for the Communities Minister, nevertheless, given the seriousness of the issue, is the Minister able to comment on it?

Mr Murphy: I would not want to comment on an individual council's issues, but I would say that we undertake this exercise to try to find the fairest rating system. If we have managed to keep rates down and local government goes off and decides to fill the gap by putting its rate up, that really undoes the work done in this institution. There needs to be a greater degree of cooperation across all the councils with this institution. Of course local government can set its own rate — that is its remit — but, if we have a collective approach to try to support the economy and town centres and to try to get as fair a rating system as possible for domestic and non-domestic properties, we need a significant degree of collaboration and cooperation from local government as well. I have spoken to my officials about that, and we will try to engage with local government in the time ahead to make sure that, whatever decisions we come to on rates, local government's approach does not depend that, one way or the other.

Mr Blair: Can consideration be given to valuations occurring perhaps more regularly than every five years? Can more advanced notice of those valuations be given?

Mr Murphy: This valuation has taken place in five years. As I said previously, when I was a member of the Finance Committee a number of years back, the criticism was that it was 13 years since the revaluation, so there was a determined effort, I am pleased to say, from the Department and from LPS to get valuations done more frequently. I think that anything more than five years would be too long, so I hope that that sets the standard that the

Department and LPS hold to for revaluation. Anything longer than that leads to very significant increases that can be very challenging for businesses.

Confidence-and-supply Agreement: Update

4. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the funding from the confidence-and-supply agreement. (AQO 73/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The £760 million of the original £1 billion confidence-and-supply funding has been allocated to Departments between 2017-18 and 2019-2020. That includes £400 million on infrastructure investment; £200 million on health transformation; £100 million on health and education pressures; £40 million on tackling severe deprivation; and £20 million on mental health. The Secretary of State told the parties that the remaining £240 million of that ring-fenced funding has been withdrawn. Discussions with the Treasury on the financial package are ongoing. In particular, I am attempting to restore the confidence-and-supply funding.

Mr McHugh: I am glad to hear that the Minister is in pursuit of the additional funds that are required in the North to meet many of our objectives. Given that the British Chancellor will deliver his Budget on 11 March, when does the Minister intend to bring forward the Executive's Budget?

Mr Murphy: I am sorry; I did not catch the last bit of the question.

Mr McHugh: When do you intend to bring forward the Executive's Budget to the Assembly, given that the British Chancellor will issue his Budget on 11 March?

Mr Murphy: Sorry; my apologies to the Member.

Yes, that creates a bit of a challenge, because, if, as is promised or as seems to be promised by the British Prime Minister, the Budget involves a significant degree of spending, that will have a trickle-down impact on our Budget. In order to satisfy rates bills going out, we need an early Budget in March. We might then miss that date, and we might have substantial funds to reallocate — I hope that we have — as a consequence of the Budget in Westminster. However, we are not certain of that, so the question will be, "Do we go before that or after it?". I am discussing that with officials, because we do not want to run late with that and, subsequently, have rates bills for premises going out late to businesses that bank on spending money incrementally over the year, in terms of their rates liability.

It is a bit of a dilemma that the Budget in Britain is on 11 March. It is really in the middle of the timescale for us doing our work, but we obviously want to get some understanding of what finances might flow from that for this institution.

Mr Allister: Is there not a more fundamental question of confidence for the Minister, given his cruel treatment of the Quinn family, that he should be reflecting upon?

In respect of the confidence-and-supply money, if the offer has been withdrawn, is there any indication that that money is ever going to come to whoever the Minister of Finance might be? If Minister Murphy had a shred of integrity, he would have resigned over the Quinn issue.

Mr Murphy: First, in relation to the question, there was a certain understanding between those who negotiated the confidence-and-supply money and those who were providing it that it was ring-fenced and that, even if the profile had to be extended into later years, that money would be ring-fenced. The Secretary of State told us verbally — we have no written communication — that such money was no longer on the table. We have been engaging with the Treasury to try to secure that money and the moneys that are committed to in the promises in the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ document.

I will not take any lectures from the Member who refused to discipline his own party member Trevor Collins, who was campaigning for the UDA killer Torrens Knight, who carried out a massacre in Greysteel.

Mr Allister: You called an innocent man a criminal.

Mr Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr Murphy: The Member who sat alongside loyalist paramilitaries —

Mr Allister: You have a criminal conviction yourself, Mr Murphy.

Mr Murphy: — on the loyalist marching band forum —

Mr Speaker: Order. Will the Minister resume his seat for one second? I just remind Mr Allister that he has to listen to the Speaker when he calls “Order” in the House. I expect that, as I respect all Members, all Members must respect the order and the ruling of the Speaker.

Mr Murphy: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I am just pointing out some of the discrepancies in the Member’s own approach in relation to issues, which makes him just another unionist with double standards. In other words, a hypocrite.

Mr O’Toole: I was interested to hear the Minister refer to discussions that he has had about the UK Budget on 10 March. Can he give us an update on discussions he has had around the creation of two bodies: the fiscal council that is mentioned in the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ document, which will, hopefully, address some of the inconsistencies he talked about in the Treasury’s approach; and the fiscal commission — the independent Smith commission-style body — that he has expressed a desire to see set up? Will he give us an update on those two things?

Mr Murphy: The Member is quite right, in that the fiscal council was first mentioned in the Stormont House Agreement and has yet to be set up. It is a function that is very regular in democracies, particularly in the Western world, to assist an Executive with spending plans and with looking at issues to be faced in the longer term. It can be a very useful body. There is not much by way of detail in the description in the document or the reference to it in the most recent agreement. We want to flesh that out a little bit and bring forward some ideas, including a remit, the type of personnel that would sit on it and the type of function that it would provide for the Executive, and put that to Executive colleagues. I hope to do that in the near future.

The Member is correct about the fiscal commission: I have signalled my desire for that. As the discussion on rates shows, we have very limited fiscal levers. To support our Programme for Government priorities, it would be useful for an Executive to have a greater range of fiscal levers

at their disposal. As I have indicated to colleagues, I am very happy to do some work on a commission. Again, the detail of its remit and the personnel involved in it need to be fleshed out, but I would like to see such a commission consult with Members and right across the community on what tax-varying levers we may be able to secure and place at our disposal.

The Member is correct that it is an exercise that has already been done in Scotland and Wales. I do not see any reason why we would not try to access some financial levers to allow us to support our Programme for Government, determine our priorities and try to fund them accordingly.

Ms Bradshaw: What will plan B be for the York Street interchange if the Minister is unsuccessful in securing the remainder of the confidence-and-supply money?

Mr Murphy: This was a report that was given verbally at a meeting. I was not involved in negotiating the confidence-and-supply money nor how it would be spent, but my understanding is that money that appears to be short was more to do with broadband contracts than the York Street interchange. That is one factor of the money that we want to try to secure, but the bigger factor is the money that was committed to as part of the financial commitments in the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ document. Those were substantial commitments that were worked through with all the parties, working with senior civil servants, the head of the Civil Service, the permanent secretary of the Department of Finance and senior civil servants from the NIO. It was not simply a wish list that people dreamed up and presented. It was a carefully worked-through document. There are significant commitments in that that need to be met. If they are not met, we will be into a very difficult situation over the next number of years in trying to deliver on our priorities.

FTC Underspend

5. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Finance, given that the Executive had to return £150 million of financial transactions capital (FTC) DEL to HM Treasury, to outline his plans to ensure that ring-fenced funding will not go unallocated. (AQO 74/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Financial transactions capital can be used only for loans to, or equity investment in, the private sector. It cannot be used to fund departmental pressures. The position in 2019-2020 was exacerbated by the inability to use FTC for co-ownership housing as planned. This was due to the delay in taking legislation through Westminster to address the classification issue. The Communities Minister has indicated her intention to resolve this matter for 2020-21.

I am keen to ensure a significant uptake in the use of financial transactions capital, and a range of actions are being taken. My officials have been engaging with the Treasury and other devolved Administrations to discuss how this funding will be used in other regions. In addition, departmental officials are liaising with the Strategic Investment Board to examine the issues leading to the lack of uptake. I have asked that they also engage with other Departments to explore innovative ways in which the funding can be used. I will bring the result of this work to the Executive in due course.

Ms Bailey: Thank you very much for your answer, Minister. I was glad to hear you mention the co-ownership scheme in particular. Given the level of need for all social housing providers and those working within urban regeneration, does he feel that the Northern Ireland Investment Fund has proved beneficial in relieving any pressures in those sectors?

Mr Murphy: I am certain that the Communities Minister, who is here beside me, will look at all funding opportunities. The priority is to try to provide housing for hard-pressed people and families who are seeking proper homes. I think that that is a commitment the Executive also want to support.

As I said in response to an earlier question, the commitments that were given in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document need to be fulfilled. That will provide us with a significant amount of capital over the next 10 years, which will allow us to engage in some of those programmes. I am certain that the Executive and the Communities Minister, in particular, will look at any and all resources that may become available to try to press forward with that programme.

3.15 pm

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

Rates: Revaluation Process

T1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Finance, albeit that he has answered a number of questions on rates, whether he accepts that there is concern at the lack of consistency in the revaluation process, with some people experiencing a massive hike in their bills. (AQT 51/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I certainly do. That is the evidence —. I am an elected representative in the constituency, as is the Member, and like me, he will be talking to business people and business owners about some of the issues they have with that. As I said, there are different methodologies to calculate that. There has been a substantial consultation with the business community over the autumn. Out of that, some suggestions have flowed, and I want to look at those carefully. The objective in all this is to get the fairest possible rating system for people and to ensure that businesses remain viable and that nothing that the Executive do challenges them in trying to do that. However, the revenue from rates is hugely important in the provision of health, education and other public services, so that is the balance that we have to strike. If there are instances where, people feel, the valuation has been substantially too high, they need to engage with LPS. If they are in the hospitality sector, they need to provide some evidence of their turnover, but, in other sectors, they need to engage to see whether they can get a change of approach to it.

Mr Irwin: Does the Minister accept that, for some businesses, the rates have become intolerable? I know of one business in a small town in the Newry and Armagh constituency that had a rates bill of £36,000, which was increased, in the new proposal, to £50,000 a year.

Mr Murphy: That seems very substantial, but I would need to know the details of the business involved to make any further comment on that. I would say that, where people

feel that the increase is unwarranted, they should engage with LPS and should provide whatever information they can to challenge that. I will encourage LPS to engage with all businesses to make sure that people can attempt to make their case to LPS to try to get the fairest possible rating liability assessment.

New Decade, New Approach: Financial Commitments

T2. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Finance, given the strong possibility that his party will be in government in the South, to outline his plans to engage with the Irish Government on the financial commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. (AQT 52/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I had been in the process of seeking a meeting with the Finance Minister in Dublin, Paschal Donohoe, when the election was called, so it was not possible to have that meeting. The election came very quickly after our institutions re-formed, so, clearly, there is a need for a meeting. I have to say that the commitments given by the Government in Dublin as part of the agreement were outlined clearly to us in financial terms as to what the amounts were, whereas that was not the case on the British Government side. I have had conversations with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste since that, and I expect them to live up to those commitments.

There are, obviously, other areas we need to explore in terms of European funding or funding that may flow from Brexit preparations. The earliest possible meeting with the new Finance Minister in Dublin is something I intend to pursue very quickly.

Mr McNulty: Will the Minister pursue any other all-Ireland priorities?

Mr Murphy: A bit like him, the all-Ireland priority I am pursuing is Armagh for the title [Laughter.] Aside from that pressing issue, of course, there are a range of issues, and it is important that we get an early meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council to pick things up where it left off over the years. As I say, there are issues and challenges that flow to all parts of the island from Brexit, from the protocols that have to be worked out and from the arrangements that need to be made as a consequence of that, but there are other significant areas. There is mention of a border fund in the document, and that is something I want to explore with the Finance Minister in Dublin and with the Treasury, because border communities in both states have suffered most from peripherality and will continue to suffer as a consequence of Brexit, regardless of how it plays out. While I want to have those discussions, the North/South Ministerial Council is the best vehicle for them, and I look forward to its earliest possible reinstatement. Of course, we have to get a Government elected in Dublin, and who knows what the make-up of that may be, but the sooner we have a Government in place, the better, and I think this Executive can get down to business with it.

Procurement: Reform

T3. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his plans to reform procurement. (AQT 53/17-22)

Mr Murphy: People do not often recognise that the Executive, small and all as we are in this place, are

a substantial spender of public funds. We have an opportunity to ensure that those funds are spent in an ethical way that promotes equality but also in a way that supports the Programme for Government commitments and priorities that the Executive have. We need to have a strong hold on procurement policy. I intend to review procurement policy. I will also consider, in the future, a social value Act to make sure that we get the best benefit for society out of public money, which is, after all, society's money that we are in charge of spending in this institution. I want to see procurement done in a way that is ethical and promotes the values of this institution and the objectives of the Programme for Government.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for his answer. The social enterprise sector is of the strong view that, if social value is to be properly accounted for, it has to be part of scoring criteria for tenders. Does the Minister intend to consider that issue as part of the pre-consultation?

Mr Murphy: Yes, we do, and there has been ongoing engagement with the social sector. Some of the issues that they have raised can, I think, be changed as a matter of policy. A social value Act is certainly one issue that has been put forward and is under consideration. If I intend to bring forward proposals on that, I will bring them to the Executive and discuss them with the Finance Committee. At a time when we have a very restricted budget in public finances, we need to make sure that we spend them in the best way possible that promotes not only the greatest benefit for society but the objectives of the Programme for Government.

Paul Quinn

T4. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Finance, given that he will be aware of the disquiet, public concern and concern of many in the Assembly at his inability to give an adequate public apology to the family of Paul Quinn, whether he would like to take the opportunity now to state unequivocally that he accepts that Paul Quinn was not a criminal and to pledge to give a full account of the incident, as he knows it, to the PSNI and an Garda Síochána. (AQT 54/17-22)

Mr Murphy: First, I made a statement last week, and I have written to that family. I would caution the Member in saying I should give a full account of the incident as I know it, because that is a presumption that I have knowledge in relation to that incident. I would just caution him in relation to his language and the Committee that wrote to me in the same terms. It is a very dangerous presumption to make for me, personally, but also for those who make it, in terms of their legal future.

Mr Butler: No presumption meant, Minister. Has the Minister considered his position at any point in these past few weeks in line with the seven principles for public service and the ministerial code of conduct?

Mr Murphy: Well, I say no. Can I say that the incident he refers to is some 13 years old? Not two weeks ago here, your party leader welcomed my appointment as Minister and pledged himself to work with me in good faith. I find this belated adherence to the issue that you have now raised — I have known people in your party — your party leader — for four years. The issue was never raised with me once. I have been Chair of the Economy Committee, and he was my Deputy Chair: never raised the issue

once. I met the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee a number of weeks ago: they never raised this issue with me. They wished me well; they wanted to support me in my role as Minister. Yet, in this last week, apparently, they have had some serious considerations about my fitness for being a Minister. So you will understand if I feel somewhat sceptical about their belated interest in this issue. As I said in a previous answer, I have written to the family; I made a statement last week; and that is where the matter rests with me.

Brexit: Economic and Fiscal Impact

T5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance whether his departmental officials will work with the Department for the Economy to publish detailed assessments of the economic and fiscal impact on Northern Ireland of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act, including the impact if the UK does not conclude a trade deal with the EU by December. (AQT 55/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As the Member knows, the Executive have established a Brexit subcommittee. One of the first things that we ascertained last week is that the consequences of a no deal, even though they are perhaps less serious now than they were prior to that agreement, are still on the table for us. That option still has to be planned for.

We will continue to assess not only the loss of European Union funding across the various programmes but the cost of the implementation of the protocols here. We want to engage with Treasury on that. I had a discussion with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers about that last week. There are implications from loss of funding for both Scotland and Wales, but, uniquely here, we have the additional cost of implementing the protocols and the negative impact that some of the protocols may have on our economy.

Those are additional questions that will arise, but I expect that the subcommittee, which met for the first time only last week and is meeting again tomorrow, will work through the issues. We will work with the other institutions. We will work with Dublin, we will work with Brussels, and we will engage with Treasury to try to ensure that we suffer as little as possible from the consequences. The Member will recognise, as I do, that there is no good outcome from Brexit for anybody on this island.

Mr McGlone: You have kindly outlined the connections that you have had with Ministers in other regions on the issue. Will you advise me, please, whether any mechanism has been established whereby there can be progress updates on how the withdrawal agreement is moving along — those negotiations with the EU — and on whether there might be a trade deal before the end of the year? What is the mechanism for that, if one has been established with the various regions?

Mr Murphy: For the devolved Administrations, there is that joint ministerial meeting. One happened two weeks ago in Cardiff that the First Minister and deputy First Minister were at. I think that that was the first experience of that institution from a ministerial point of view. I know that the Scottish institution has complained long and loud about a lack of information coming to that. Our First Minister and deputy First Minister will have to test it to see whether we get satisfactory information and updates on how negotiations are proceeding.

Of course, we can engage with Brussels at any stage, as I intend to do and as, I am sure, other Executive Ministers intend to do. We can also engage with Dublin to get a sense of how negotiations are going. We do not have only one fighter in the game, if you know what I mean, but other sources of information. It is important, however, for the Executive and the Assembly to have access to all the information that we can, because, as we have said, the impact on this island will be worse than anywhere else. The consequences for us are worse than for anywhere else. We need to secure all the information necessary to try to offset as best we can the consequences that flow from Brexit.

Rates: Hospitality and Retail Sectors

T6. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Finance, after reminding him that he is a member of the Finance Committee and that, like the Minister's former colleague Francie Brolly, he wants to do whatever he can to try to help, whether the Minister agrees that there is a genuine fear, especially among the hospitality trade, of what is coming down the road, and, given that he has heard the Minister say that he wants to engage with that sector, to state whether he will engage with the hospitality and retail sectors at meetings, at which the Member would be happy to accompany him. (AQT 56/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am not simply a Minister but a constituency representative who engages with businesses in his constituency frequently, so I am very aware of some of the issues that have been raised. A rates round table was planned for the Executive on Wednesday, but the Executive have arranged an awayday session that has superseded it. I am almost certain that a date for it has been rescheduled, when we will get in all the sectors and have a full discussion about the impacts of the incoming rates policy.

We have not set the rate yet. We want to make sure that we hear fully and get all the information from all the sectors on how this is impacting on them, to enable us to make the most fair decision. As I have said on a number of occasions, the objective of this is to get the fairest rate possible so that we can support people in business, try to grow the economy and meet some of the Executive's Programme for Government targets.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a couple of moments.

3.30 pm

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

Health

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their seat again, please. It is now time for questions to the Minister of Health. I advise Members that question 7 has been withdrawn.

Mental Health Services

1. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans to enhance mental health services for young people. (AQO 85/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): As the Member is aware, mental health is one of my top priorities, and this includes delivering better child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for people under 18. To do this, I will pursue a particular focus on prevention and early intervention. This will be done on a cross-sectoral basis, particularly with colleagues in the education sector, to promote emotional and mental well-being in schools, educate our young people on their mental health and strengthen the links between schools and mental health support services.

In parallel with that, I want to deliver investment to tackle long and unacceptable waiting lists so that our young people do not have to wait longer than nine weeks to see a CAMHS professional. This, of course, will require the support of the Executive in the forthcoming Budget process, and this additional investment will be used to address current workforce challenges in the sector and improve access to CAMHS to ensure that our young people get the help that they need. In providing CAMHS, a particular focus will be on leading the interdepartmental work on the action plan in response to the Children's Commissioner's 'Still Waiting' report.

Finally, in line with the New Decade, New Approach agreement, I will publish a mental health action plan by the end of March and a mental health strategy by December 2020. This will be informed by the findings of the regional children's mental health prevalence study, which is due to report later this year, and will set out the strategic direction and service requirement for CAMHS over the next decade. In all of this work, I am fully committed to working in partnership with all relevant stakeholders to allow everyone to have their say in shaping what our mental health services will look like in the future.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will, of course, be aware of the level of anger across our community at the inadequate investment in mental health services for children and young people. Indeed, the system has been found by the Children's Commissioner to be:

"under significant pressure, finding it difficult to respond to the scale of need and the complexity of issues with which children and young people are presenting."

What specific urgent actions is the Minister taking to urgently improve the provision of and investment in mental health resilience and suicide prevention services available to young people in Northern Ireland? Will he meet the Northern Ireland Youth Forum on this matter?

Mr Swann: First of all, with regard to meeting the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, I think it already has a question in. As regards the specific actions, I am fully aware of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's report and the actions and recommendations that she has brought forward. We have not been able to fully scope all 50 of those recommendations into what our future mental health strategy will look like, but, as I said in my opening comments, funding for our CAMHS is one of the major stumbling blocks that we have.

Investment in CAMHS is now over £20 million annually. That is actually double what it was 10 years ago, but this figure does not include investments made by the Public Health Agency in a wide range of children's services, such

as family support services, safeguarding and primary care services. In addition, more than £0.5 million of non-recurrent investment from the transformation money was made available to CAMHS-specific projects in Northern Ireland in 2019-2020. It is well recognised that CAMHS is underfunded, but I hope to address that in my tenure as Health Minister, with the support of Executive colleagues.

Mrs Cameron: The Minister mentioned that he will be working with the education sector; that is very welcome and very appropriate. Will the Minister comment on any consideration he is giving to working with the third sector and what help and support he can be to that sector so that it can be a help to him on the issue of mental health?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. Her last comment is the critical bit: it is about what help it can be to me as well as what help I can be to it. When it comes to the mental health and well-being of people in Northern Ireland society in general, it is about interaction and joining the dots between the voluntary and community sector, the Department and service providers to make sure that we have a holistic approach to meeting needs. There is no simple fix for the challenges that we face at the moment. That is why it is important to have involvement and buy-in from all our sectors to the mental health strategy. I want to ensure, through reaching out, that there is co-production as we take the process forward. I recognise the value that they contribute to what we, as a Department, want to do.

Mr Gildernew: It was said in the Health Committee that there is a lack of data relating to children's mental health in particular. Will the Minister take account of that and see whether he can urgently move to address the lack of data, as any forward planning will be dependent on good data? There are also concerns around data transfer post-Brexit. Will the Minister also consider those issues?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair for his comments and his question about how data will be managed in regards to Brexit. That is an issue that we are looking at across the entire Department and health service, because it will affect the mental health and well-being of not just our young people, which is where the question started out from, but all sections of our mental health system. We are clarifying exactly how the data can be coded correctly across the Department and all the departmental structures to make sure that we recognise and identify those issues collectively. We are aware that the coding is not pulling together all the data that we need. That was raised in the Committee, as the Chairman noted.

Ms Sugden: Last week, a young constituent told me that, when she tried to access the CAMHS crisis team, she was told that it provided services only to those aged up to 17 and nor could she access the adult crisis services. If it is the case that there is a gap of one year and we are not addressing 17- and 18-year-olds in crisis, that gives me great cause for concern. I am keen to hear your thoughts, Minister.

Mr Swann: I do not know the specific case that the Member refers to, but, if she wants to ask for a meeting outside, we will raise that issue with the CAMHS support team. I would be surprised if there is a gap between 17 and 18, because I know that, for someone with special educational needs, for example, the transfer between those age groups is something that is taken very seriously. If the Member wants to raise that specific issue with me, I will look at it with her.

Trans Healthcare

2. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health to outline the actions he is taking to depathologise trans healthcare to reflect recent changes to the World Health Organization's classification of diseases and in international best practice. (AQO 86/17-22)

Mr Swann: A review of gender identity services is under way to identify a new model of care for transgender and non-binary people in Northern Ireland. As part of that process, a gender identity service pathway review group has been established. Membership of the group includes officials from my Department, the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency, the Patient and Client Council, the Royal College of General Practitioners, and service users' representatives. The group is, of course, aware of the declassification of gender identity issues as mental health problems in the eleventh edition of the international statistical classification of diseases and related health problems, and it will be mindful of that when taking its work forward. The group is due to report on its findings and recommendations by June 2020.

Trans and non-binary people also experience the same health problems as the rest of the population. Therefore, if their condition is unrelated to gender dysphoria or its treatment, they will be treated in the same way as any other patient with that condition.

Ms Armstrong: I am aware that there are representatives of trans persons on that review panel. However, the criteria to pick those people were never published. As we come out of New Decade, New Approach, and in light of civic engagement and public consultation, other organisations such as TransgenderNI may be involved in that review. Will the Minister meet TransgenderNI?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her supplementary. I will answer the last part first: I will invite a number of organisations to an LGBTQ+ round table at the end of March. To my knowledge, TransgenderNI is one of those organisations. In regard to her earlier point, organisations have been asked to identify to the Department what they want to discuss at that round table. If they make that a priority issue that they want to raise, we will consider it at that point.

Ms Ni Chuilín: I would be quite shocked if, at the meeting with TransgenderNI and others, the issue of conversion therapy, and the need to bring legislation forward to ban it, was not raised. Does the Minister have any plans to bring forward legislation to ban the inhumane practice of conversion therapy?

Mr Swann: I will be honest: this is the first time the issue has been raised with me in my time as Minister. If the issue is brought up at the round table, we will definitely consider it. As the Member has raised it today, I give her the commitment that we will put it in our work scope.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question 5 has been withdrawn.

GP Practices: Closure

3. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health how he will address the closure of GP practices. (AQO 87/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. As he is aware, general practice is a crucial part of our health

service and is the first point of contact for the majority of people who access Health and Social Care. Although the number of GP practices in Northern Ireland has reduced from 350 in 2014 to 327 in 2019, there were only five practice closures in that period. The remaining 18 practices were part of mergers with larger practices that took place to ensure longer-term sustainability. In most cases, those mergers offered patients an increased range of services, with access to a multi-professional workforce, including new roles such as practice-based pharmacists and advanced nurse practitioners.

To minimise disruption to patients, where the Health and Social Care Board receives notice of a potential closure, it takes all the necessary steps to secure the continuation of GP services. That includes advertising the contract widely and liaising with local practices that may wish to operate an additional surgery. Patients are kept informed throughout that process.

To address GP workforce challenges, we are also working hard to support the recruitment and retention of GPs. The number of GP training places has been significantly increased over the last few years, from 65 in 2015 to 111 in 2019. Initiatives are also in place to support GPs to return to or remain in general practice through the GP induction and refresher scheme and the GP retainer scheme.

The induction and refresher scheme aims to provide support to GPs returning to or entering clinical practice in Northern Ireland by ensuring that GPs who have not worked in clinical general practice for 24 months or more and those who have not previously worked in general practice in the UK can be appropriately inducted and have the necessary skills for the provision of general medical services. By the end of January 2020, eight doctors had completed the induction and refresher scheme, with a further three currently completing the scheme.

Finally, through the transformation programme, we are reshaping primary care services. The roll-out of multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) is delivering new capacity and innovation into primary care, bringing services closer to our communities and improving access for all our citizens. We are delivering MDTs in every trust area, improving access to physiotherapy, mental health support and social workers. MDTs are a cornerstone of our plans to transform the health service and will make an important contribution to the long-term sustainability of general practice.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind the Minister that there is a limit of two minutes for an answer; he can request an extra minute if he feels that he is talking about a particularly important issue.

Mr Newton: Although the Minister has taken that little bit of extra time, I welcome his response because he has delved into the matter and has given a very detailed answer. When it comes to practices coming together, my constituents would take some convincing that that has been to their advantage —

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

Mr Newton: — when they have to make appointments or cannot get appointments unless they wait a long time.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his supplementary. We have to address that issue by recruiting more GPs. As I said, the number of practices has not reduced greatly,

but the issue is getting more GPs into the service and the multidisciplinary teams. Somebody who phones a GP practice might not necessarily need to be seen by a doctor; a pharmacist, a physiotherapist or even a mental health specialist may be the better professional for the continuation of their care.

Somebody might think they need to see a GP, but, with a multidisciplinary team, there may be another service professional in there who is better placed to support them. Through the introduction and expansion of multidisciplinary teams, we hope to address that problem.

3.45 pm

Ms Anderson: In the context of increasing the supply of GPs and of tackling regional inequalities west of the Bann, you will be aware there is growing frustration in Derry about the expansion of Magee university. You know that there is an outline business case on your desk, and I know you have been looking for further clarification on that. Where are you with regard to giving consideration to moving on the expansion of Magee? We would like to address the frustration in Derry, but primarily we want to get the medical school in Magee moved forward.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question specifically on where we are with the medical school at Magee. I do not have the full business case in front of me, because we met with Robin Walker, the junior NIO Minister, the week before last to clarify whether the moneys promised in New Decade, New Approach apply to revenue and capital for the Magee business school. We are seeking clarifications on that and on where the moneys can be aligned. The Member will be aware that, while the medical school is part of my remit, there is cross-sectoral departmental input from the Department for the Economy into the wider expansion of Magee. I assure her that we are looking very seriously at the medical school at Magee for the provision of GPs and at people getting post-degree qualifications at that medical school, because that will address, in our opinion, some of the GP shortages we face.

Mrs Barton: Is the Minister aware of the particular challenges of recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of GPs in Fermanagh and south Tyrone?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question, which follows on from the one that was asked previously. There is a problem with a shortage of GPs across the country, and I suppose that is felt especially in Fermanagh. However, given the rural nature of the Member's constituency and the prominence of small GP practices that cover large rural communities and populations, I recognise there are particular challenges in the county. I hope the significant increase in GP training places, as well as Magee, will address that.

Mr McGrath: The Minister referred to closures and the amalgamation of some practices. Is there some specific work that can be done to mitigate those closures in rural areas, which have been mentioned, where such a closure would have a greater impact, as people would have to travel further if services were centralised or closed?

Mr Swann: On that question of access to a GP in the rural community, when we look at the mergers of GP practices, we see that GPs are private contractors, so, while we have some input into and interaction with the signposting of patients and on how the best care provision

is delivered, we can have an influence but cannot direct GPs on where those services should be. The Member's point is well made, but it is also about how we expand the multidisciplinary teams into our rural practices, because, as the Member said, it is difficult to retain GPs in rural constituencies. As I said, it is about how we bring in those other health professionals, like, as I said, physiotherapists, community pharmacists and all the rest of it to make sure the service people are being provided in their GP surgery is one that delivers in a timely fashion.

Oral Health Strategy

4. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to revise and update the oral health strategy 2007. (AQO 88/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. I may require an extra minute for this answer, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The development of a new oral health strategy would carry a significant resource cost, and, in the context of the range of financial pressures facing Health and Social Care, it has not been possible in past years to identify funding for that. That having been said, my Chief Dental Officer's professional view is that most of the 2007 oral health strategy remains fit for purpose, given the current evidence base and cost-effectiveness of available interventions and available funding. We are making excellent progress in some of those key areas, and I think that is important to stress today.

For example, recently emerging data for five-year-old children provides evidence of further significant improvement in respect of the relevant oral health strategy targets. One target was to improve the then 39% of five-year-old children who were decay-free to 50% within 10 years. In 2013, the data indicated that we had actually achieved 60% of five-year-olds who were decay-free. The emerging data from 2018-19 indicates that 70% of five-year-old children are decay-free.

There have also been very significant additional improvements with regard to the severity of dental disease in that age group of children. Another oral health strategy target aimed to improve the relevant technical metric by a threshold of 24% in 2013, and the data has highlighted a 44% improvement. The latest data appears to indicate that a further 18% improvement has been achieved since then.

These are notable successes, especially given the many regional differences that we face at UK level that enable England to generally achieve better child oral health outcomes, but the work continues. My Chief Dental Officer has established oral health options groups to allow for the consideration and development of further oral health policy options for the two most urgent groups at present, namely children and the elderly. In parallel with that, I will continue to pursue additional funding for this important area.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you for your answer, Minister. I am glad that there is a group working for children and young people. That was part of my supplementary question. Can the Minister outline how the strategy is still fit for purpose when its data is 17 years old?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. As I said, with regard to the feedback that I have had from the Chief Dental Officer, it is where we target resources at present,

both physical and monetary. Two of the main targets in that area, as I said, are younger people and older people. I gave the specific measure of where we are improving children's dental health. The Chief Dental Officer wants to focus on those two groups. That will allow faster delivery of outputs and allow for — forgive the pun — a better, bite-sized approach, so that we can actually look at those two groups. We have engaged with hospital specialists, professional representation from clinicians and general dental practice, community dental service representatives from the Department, and the board.

While I have mentioned younger people, in the elderly group the changing ageing demographic in the population already presents challenges, with, inevitably, ever-increasing need for health and social care services. People are retaining more of their teeth, and for longer, which represents a significant oral health improvement over the decades. Whilst many people in older age can maintain and enjoy good oral health, there is a need for higher service provision for the frail elderly population. Officials are aware of the issue. The elderly options group will help to develop possible measures. It is about taking the strategy piece by piece, rather than developing an entirely new strategy, that we are working on at present.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members to continue to rise in their place if they wish to be called.

Ms McLaughlin: The Minister has actually touched on what I had intended to ask, but can he be more specific on the efforts that are being made to encourage the uptake of dental care, particularly among older people? That cohort is particularly at risk of difficulties with oral cancer, which can have absolutely devastating effects, not just on the person who has it but on their wider families —.

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

Mr Swann: I am conscious that my answer did cover the Member's question, but she raised an important topic. Whereas we usually think of our dentists as looking solely at teeth and fillings, dentists are actually a key front-line defence in the early identification of oral cancer. It is about recognising the larger contribution that dentists make to the health service in Northern Ireland. As I said with regard to the older group, there are additional challenges as dementia becomes more prevalent. That puts further challenges on dentists who deal with those patients. The dental profession is changing from how most of us knew it as children. Its provision is becoming a more integral part of our health service.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, the statistics and progress that you outlined for oral health are very encouraging. Last time, you touched on the key role that our community dentists can play. Given the growing pressures on our independent dental contractors, are you minded to review the current health service dental fees?

Mr Swann: As I said to Members earlier, it is not something that is on my table at this minute in time, but as the Member has raised it I am sure that it will now be on my officials' radar. The Member has made her point. I am sure that her leader's husband will be particularly keen on this, as he is a dentist. *[Laughter.]*

East Antrim GP Federation

6. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the work of the East Antrim GP Federation. (AQO 90/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. GP federations are community interest companies (CICs), established and owned by GPs. Although they are a relatively recent addition to primary care, they have very quickly made a hugely valuable contribution to supporting GPs and improving primary care services.

I understand that the East Antrim GP Federation has been working positively with local Health and Social Care partners in the Northern Trust area to deliver better services for patients. For example, the federation is delivering a proactive nursing-home service, which has been running since October 2018. The service provides anticipatory care for nursing-home residents, reducing inappropriate emergency department attendances and hospital admissions.

Further practices in the federation are also participating in the primary care paediatric hub, which seeks to link primary and secondary care clinicians to provide high-quality care for children and families. It is clear that that approach is making a significant and positive impact on the health service and, crucially, on the lives of patients.

I am clear that partnership working, right across the system, is the best way in which to deliver the transformation that we all want to see. It is equally clear that a strong network of GP federations can play a crucial role in the process. I take the opportunity to record my thanks for the important work of the East Antrim GP Federation, and, indeed, of all our federations.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his answer. I very much welcome his positive assessment of the East Antrim GP Federation to date, which embeds pharmacists in GP practices. Will the Minister provide an update on the roll-out of practice-based pharmacists, please?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. The practice-based pharmacist initiative has been rolled out through the GP federations, including the East Antrim GP Federation. The GP federations are acting as employers rather than individual practices. That has enabled a network of pharmacists to be established that can deliver a resilient, sustainable service. The initiative also provides a support network for pharmacists to share and learn from best practice.

Practice-based pharmacists play an important role in releasing GP time spent on prescribing activities, and that increases overall GP capacity. They are working with GPs to improve the quality and safety of prescribing and to secure efficiencies in the primary care prescribing budget. As well as important patient care, the initiative is a key enabler of transformation in general practice and enables pharmacists to make greater use of their clinical skills as part of a multidisciplinary team.

Currently, 274 practice-based pharmacists are in post, and a further wave of recruitment is due in 2020. That will increase the number to 330.

Partnership Working

8. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Health how partnership working and co-production will be included in the criteria for the reconfiguration of services. (AQO 92/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. My Department is adhering to the statutory requirements for public involvement and consultation set out in the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 and to the policy position set out in the regional Health and Social Care publication, 'Co-production Guide: Connecting and Realising Value Through People'.

As described in my Department's guide, working together in partnership is about realising value through people. It is about identifying and harnessing the different skills, experience and expertise residing within individuals and their communities to build truly representative networks that can deliver real and positive change.

We are all aware that how health and social care is provided here must change, and that means that there are difficult choices to be made; for example, how to balance demand and prioritise services in the midst of financial constraints and how to balance local accessibility with the quality of care that can be provided.

I am committed to using existing mechanisms and to seeking out new ways of working to connect those providing health and social care, those with lived experience of that care and their families and carers, policy-makers and local communities to the planning, delivery and evaluation of those services.

Co-production is integral to all planning for the transformation of hospital services in such cases as the Daisy Hill pathfinder project, the review of urgent and emergency care, and day case elective care centres. The cancer strategy is also currently being taken forward through co-production. I have confidence that, by truly putting people at the heart of making decisions and choices about services and by providing a direct link to the designing and planning of those services at a strategic level, we will achieve the improvements in experiences and outcomes we need to transfigure health and social care provision.

4.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our time for listed Health questions. We move on to topical questions. I advise Members that topical question 4 has been withdrawn.

Coronavirus: DOH Preparation

T1. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health for an update on his Department's preparation in response to the ongoing spread of coronavirus. (AQT 61/17-22)

Mr Swann: If I may, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take a wee bit more time with this, because I am aware of the importance of the issue. I thank the Chair of the Health Committee for his interaction and support while we have dealt with this over the past few weeks.

My Department has set up an emergency operations centre and has updated relevant websites with advice to members of the public. A helpline for coronavirus has been

established in Northern Ireland to provide advice for those who may have concerns following a visit to China and the now expanded region in the past 14 days. It operates a 24-hours-a-day call centre, and its number is 0300 555 0119. The Chief Medical Officer has also issued letters providing guidance to clinical staff on what to do if they encounter patients with respiratory infections arriving from overseas.

My Department, along with other public health agencies, remains in regular contact with the relevant authorities across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to ensure that any necessary precautions are in place in Northern Ireland in response to the situation. I have also updated my Executive colleagues and do so weekly and have their full support and commitment for dealing with the issue. I have asked my officials to consider what additional public health legislation may be of benefit in our efforts to contain the future spread of the novel coronavirus in Northern Ireland. My Department will continue to remain in contact with officials in the Republic of Ireland and work closely with officials and public health colleagues in the event of a case on the island of Ireland.

A joined-up approach to communications remains vital. We have been working closely with our PHA and communications teams throughout the four nations to ensure that we send out a clear, coordinated and consistent message across the United Kingdom.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the number of written statements that he has issued to Members over the past period; indeed, I am aware of his cooperation with the Health Committee. Does he agree that information is crucial at this stage? It is important that as much information — correct information — as possible goes out to the public, because the last thing we want is misinformation and rumours. The spread of misinformation is dangerous. I encourage the Minister to continue issuing information to Members and the public.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that. He used the phrase “correct information”: the last thing we want is a public health scare. I stress to Members that we need to be careful that we do not stigmatise the Chinese community in Northern Ireland. It would be very easy and very dangerous to do that.

At this minute in time, there are no reported cases in Northern Ireland. As long as we can maintain that, it will be beneficial to us. I stress, however, that, I think, it is a matter of “When”, not “If”. At this time, the work that we are doing along with our colleagues in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland has meant that, so far, we have not had a positive case, but, as I said, it is probably a matter of time rather than anything else. Our information that we are getting out there is crucial, and it is important that members of the public contact the helpline, if they think they have symptoms.

Cystic Fibrosis Drugs

T2. **Ms Ni Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health, after stating that the Minister taking an extra minute to answer the previous question was the right thing to do in order that people get the right information, for an update on those cystic fibrosis drugs that have recently been cleared by NICE and are being used in treatment and those that are

awaiting clearance, in the light of the NICE guidelines on the availability of drugs for sufferers of cystic fibrosis. (AQT 62/17-22)

Mr Swann: I know that the Member has written to me on the issue about specific cases and specific drugs. With regard to NICE and accessing certain medications, there are procedures in the Department whereby specific funding for individual cases can be applied for. I will forward that information to the Member, if she feels that it would be helpful. Without going into any of the drugs that she has not mentioned, it would be remiss of me to name individual drugs that either do or do not have NICE clearance, because I do not have that information in front of me.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Carál Ní Cheelín for a supplementary.

Ms Ni Chuilín: It is Ní Chuilín. OK? Go raibh maith agat.

If the Minister does not mind, will he do that? I appreciate that that is a lot of information to be bounced with in topical questions.

Will the Minister take the opportunity to scotch any rumours by confirming that, once a medical practitioner, a doctor or a consultant recommends a drug for a patient, they are recommending that treatment for them on the Health and Social Care budget and that families will not be left to foot the bill, even if some of the drugs companies have given the licence to us on compassionate grounds, awaiting NICE approval? It is just that there is a lot of speculation out there, and we need to clear that up, particularly through the Cystic Fibrosis Trust and the Patient and Client Council.

Mr Swann: The clarity given by the Member is well made. I will get back to her with specific guarantees and advice on that issue, rather than giving that verbally here. I want to get it in the correct terminology so that the Member has that to pass on to her constituents and the organisations that are campaigning to access drugs that are not currently listed by NICE or the other medications that are covered by NICE that may be accessible on prescription through a consultant or a specific GP.

Breast Assessment Services: Consultation

T3. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the consultation on breast assessment services. (AQT 63/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for the question on what is a critical service. The Department has been doing a piece of work on that through the term that we have not been in place. We are aware that there is a clear need to reform breast assessment services. A shortage of specialist staff and a growing demand for breast assessment services due to the ageing population have resulted in an uneven performance across the five trusts, despite the best efforts of our hard-working staff. Action is needed to address the vulnerability of the current system and to make the service more resilient to current and future demand. The public consultation on reshaping breast assessment services closed on 30 August 2019, with over 4,600 written responses received. My officials have now completed the consultation and analysis. Once I have carefully considered all the evidence presented to me, I intend to

announce my decision on the way forward. I will, of course, update the House in due course.

Mr Beattie: The Minister will be well aware that the assessment centre in Craigavon Area Hospital in my constituency has featured heavily in that consultation. He will also be aware that I, along with the fantastic charity Knitted Knockers, which makes handmade breast prosthetics for women who have had mastectomies and breast operations, have asked to meet him. Will he facilitate that meeting with me and the charity?

Mr Swann: As far as I am aware, there is a written request in, and I will facilitate a meeting with the Member and the members of Knitted Knockers, as soon as he can bring them forward and contact my office.

Emergency Departments: Waiting Times

T5. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of our emergency departments and their waiting times, given that all Members will have seen and heard the reports of the pressures facing them across the North. (AQT 65/17-22)

Mr Swann: If I go over the allotted time, Mr Deputy Speaker, I regret it.

I deeply regret that some patients have had excessively long waits in emergency departments. The current waiting times are simply not acceptable. I am fully aware of the intense pressure that staff in our emergency departments continue to work under, and I have absolutely no doubt that we have excellent staff working in very challenging environments. I pay tribute to all our staff in the health and social care system, particularly those staff who have had to face increased demands in emergency departments in all our hospitals and continue to do their best in extremely difficult circumstances. Emergency departments continue to experience significant pressures, and there is an increase in the complexity of conditions presenting at emergency departments, particularly among the growing frail and elderly population.

The increase in demand for emergency care that we have seen in recent years illustrates the mounting pressure that the health and social care sectors are coming under and reinforces the need for change and transformation of the system. We need not only to reduce waiting times but to put in place solutions that will make the service sustainable in the longer term. That will be one of my key priorities as Minister. As the Member may be aware, my Department is undertaking a clinically led review of urgent and emergency care across the region that aims to establish a sustained regional care model that will fit the next 10 to 15 years. It is expected that an initial report will be ready for my consideration early this year.

I reassure those who say that they are losing faith in our system that the members of the health and social care system are working hard, and we are working hard to restore their confidence.

Mr Durkan: I echo the Minister's praise for our heroic health workers. Will he inform the Assembly of any plans to extend and improve the emergency department at Altnagelvin Area Hospital in my constituency?

Mr Swann: The Member is probably not aware that I visited the ED in Altnagelvin last week, along with the care

service. I saw at first hand the fantastic work that they do. I see John Dallat nodding in the background because I visited the cancer centre as well. The pressure on the ED, even at that time on a Wednesday afternoon, was considerable. There were ambulances waiting to discharge patients.

My officials have been working on a long-term capital plan for the health and social care service, and, as part of that process, they have asked all health and social care trusts to put forward their key priorities. The Western Health and Social Care Trust has been developing an outline business case for Altnagelvin phase 5.2 to include theatres, the accident and emergency department and the outpatient department. That is planned to be taken forward in two phases: 5.2A and 5.2B. The capital cost of the project is expected to be in the region of £110 million, with an additional revenue cost of £13 million per annum to enable them to open it. That was pressed on me by the chief executive of the trust when I visited. The outline business case is being worked on, and, as soon as it is presented, like everything else, it will be in the mix. I look forward to Executive colleagues supporting the financial bid.

Mr Easton: What plans is the Minister putting in place to cover the 3,000 vacancies in nursing positions across Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: The Member is aware that the shortage of nurses is one of the key challenges that we face in our general health service. Nurses are now no longer just nurses on a ward; they are part of our GP service. Nurses are the critical link. We have to address the challenge in bringing our numbers back up to date. The Member will be aware that it is part of the recurring process where we asked for an extra 900 places as part of New Decade, New Approach and how we bring that forward in conjunction with the relevant trade unions and bodies.

We are training 1,025 nurses per year, so we will have an extra 300 nurses over the next three years. We should be providing 1,325, but it is not just about bringing new nurses into the system. In an earlier answer, I mentioned getting GPs to come back into practice. We also have to look for the support mechanisms that bring nurses back into practice and into our health service, so that they can provide support and critical care for our patients.

Mr Easton: Are lessons being learned about all those positions that are not being filled? Is there an answer to the question of why that has happened? We should not let it happen in the future, because it has a knock-on effect on outpatient appointments and so on.

4.15 pm

Mr Swann: As I said in the answer, I am fully aware of the critical role the nurses play. The engagement I had with their trade union representatives in bringing the industrial action to a satisfactory close was supported by all other Executive colleagues. One of the things the nurses put forward at that time was that it was about not just pay but about safe staffing and how they are supported and enhanced in their roles. Work has been done on that. The former vice chancellor of Ulster University Sir Richard Barnett has led an independent nursing and midwifery review. That has come forward with a number of recommendations about how we support our nurses and midwives as critical components in the workforce. That

report is due to come back very shortly and will probably be published in the next two or three months, with Sir Richard's recommendations about how we value and support our nurses as part of that workforce.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our time for questions to the Department of Health.

Infrastructure

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that questions 5 and 11 have been withdrawn.

Flags and Emblems

1. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assurance that illegally erected flags and emblems will no longer be displayed from departmental property. (AQO 98/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I thank the Member for the question. I am aware of the problem of the erection of illegal flags and emblems on street furniture. It is a persistent problem and one that needs to be dealt with in a comprehensive manner. The flying of flags and the attachment of emblems to departmental street lighting columns is an offence under the Roads Order 1993, and my Department has the power to remove them from its property. One of my Department's primary considerations is the safety of the public, and where unauthorised flags or attachments pose a hazard to road users, my Department will always seek to remove that danger. While recognising my Department's responsibility, the reality is that if we as a society are to find a sustainable and lasting solution to the problem of illegal flags and emblems, we must all step up, as Ministers, as a united Executive, as leaders and members of all parties in the Assembly, with councils, landowners and agencies, including the Housing Executive and PSNI, and, importantly, with and in support of communities.

I understand this is an area being explored — with a view to finding consensus — by the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, set up as part of the Fresh Start Agreement, with a report due to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I also note the commitments to accommodating and respecting identities and cultures in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. It is long past time that we got to grips with this issue and the issues that lie beneath it. I assure the Member that I am committed to working with Executive colleagues and everyone required so that we can deal with the issue in a comprehensive and lasting way.

Mr Muir: I welcome the Minister to her role. As a fellow park runner, I know she will succeed.

I thank her for her response. Does she agree that the erection of flags and emblems can be used to mark out territory? What is the status of the flags protocol that is in place? How is that being implemented?

Ms Mallon: Yes, I agree that flags can be used to mark out territory. As I said in my response, it is a problem that persists and that we need to comprehensively try to deal with.

I believe that the answer to taking the issue forward lies in the commission and that we really need to find a

political consensus and show leadership at all levels to try to achieve that. I am committed to doing that in my Department, but I am realistic. I understand the nature of the problem, so I also understand that, if we are to genuinely deal with it, we must all work together.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister to her post and wish her well. Unfortunately, for many years in my constituency in the village of Rasharkin, illegal signs have been put up on top of directional signs. That is intimidating. They have been put up in support of republican prisoners, and, repeatedly, the police and your Department have failed to address the issue. When will you allow the Protestant minority in the village of Rasharkin to live free from the intimidation caused by that type of activity?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I firmly believe that everyone should live free from intimidation. I do not see this as an issue of one side or the other. I accept that my Department has a role to play. It is clear that, under article 87 of the Roads Order, it is an offence to fix certain attachments to the surface of a road, tree, structure or other works in or on a road. It is that legislation that my Department seeks to rely on. I want to work with the PSNI; I want to work with communities; I want to work with every single Member in the House, because that is the only way that we are going to genuinely tackle this issue in a sustainable and lasting way.

Ms Ni Chuilín: I, too, welcome the Minister to her first Question Time and wish her well. The Department has been working on revised guidance to staff around this issue for some time. Will she ensure that robust measures are taken through legislation to deal with illegally erected flags? I am sure that she will agree that everyone, regardless of who they are or where they live, has to live free from sectarian harassment.

Ms Mallon: I absolutely agree with the Member. I have asked for a detailed submission on the guidelines. As I have said consistently in answering the questions, we need to deal with this robustly, but we need to do it in a way that tackles the underlying issues as well. It is not just a simple issue of erecting an illegal flag or a banner on a lamp post or a bit of street furniture. We need to get to grips with the underlying issues. We all need to show leadership, and that means that we should be as vociferously opposed to illegal paramilitary flags representing loyalist paramilitaries going up as we should be for issues to do with dissident republicans. We need to approach this in a very equal way. I want to work with everyone in the House, and I want to play my part in tackling the issue.

Mr Allister: I agree with Mr Storey's comments to the Minister and I trust that she will take them on board. In respect of her Department, we not only have the issue of flags but the issue of permanent structures on departmental lands and those of arm's-length bodies in the form of memorials glorifying terrorism. What action is being taken in that regard? A predecessor of hers told me that there were 34 such memorials in place. Has any action been taken, and does she agree that until we get to zero tolerance of the physical force tradition, then we are going round in circles on this matter?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. If he has details of any structures that are on DFI land, I will be happy to look at them. Yes, we should have a zero

tolerance approach, but we should do so universally. We should not accept signs or structures in some places while not accepting them in others. I look forward to working with the Member and with others as we take that universal zero tolerance approach.

Community Transport

2. Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether, as one of her priorities for connecting communities, she will commit to maintaining community transport to ensure a level of service for those who depend on it. (AQO 99/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Investment in infrastructure is not an end in itself; it is a bedrock on which we deliver our Programme for Government outcomes. That is why, over the next two years, my focus will be on developing a sustainable water, drainage and transport infrastructure that improves people's lives, unlocks economic potential and plays our part in tackling the climate emergency — the single greatest global challenge we all face.

I clearly recognise the important contribution that community transport makes towards delivering that ambition and connecting some of our most vulnerable people and rural communities. However, severe constraints on my Department's budgets over recent years have resulted in reduced funding across a range of areas, including community transport and the public transport network with Translink. That has created significant challenges and is not sustainable if we, collectively, are to deliver on our Programme for Government ambitions to connect all our people and communities to the opportunities which many of us can take for granted.

I am committed to finding solutions to protect and maintain rural and community transport services. However, we all need to recognise that the benefits of community transport go well beyond my Department, impacting across the full range of Programme for Government outcomes. The fact that health-related trips currently account for one quarter of all community transport journeys is a perfect illustration of those wider impacts. At a time of constrained budgets, delivering my ambitions for community transport will require innovation, greater collaboration and cross-departmental working. I hope that Executive colleagues and all parties will support my efforts to ensure that the most vulnerable across our communities and rural areas can continue to benefit from that essential service.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I want to acknowledge the support and help that her Department gave during the suspension of the Assembly.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has given an undertaking to work in partnership with other Departments. I ask her to ensure that that happens and that community transport continues to serve the people in the way in which it has done in the past.

Ms Mallon: I completely agree with the Member. He makes an important point: if we are to achieve our ambitions of delivering a sustainable community, we need to work together.

Community transport is an issue not just for my Department. For many, it is an issue of health and

well-being and an important means of preventing social isolation. It is a lifeline service that enables some of the most vulnerable groups and communities in society to access basic opportunities. The fact that health-related trips account for one quarter of all community transport journeys illustrates that clearly.

I am keen to work with Executive colleagues to deliver collaborative programmes, such as the assisted rural travel scheme, on which I work alongside the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. We need to ensure that we continue to support vulnerable people so that they can access the opportunities that many of us take for granted.

Ms Dillon: I wish the Minister well at her first Question Time. I am happy to hear the acknowledgement of social isolation. I represent Mid Ulster, which is a very rural constituency. It stretches the whole way from Swatragh to Fivemiletown, so it covers a massive area. A lot of people in the area are very socially isolated. In the index of over 500 areas with a lack of services, Pomeroy comes eighth.

Will the Minister give a commitment that she will try to roll back from some of the budget cuts for rural transport? The cuts really do create massive issues in accessing services.

Ms Mallon: I assure the Member that I absolutely recognise the importance of community transport in reaching out to and connecting some of our most vulnerable citizens. It also allows them to access services and tackle the social isolation that you spoke about.

The reality, however, is that I have inherited severe budgetary constraints, within which I have to operate. What I am doing in these initial weeks is assessing the priorities in my budget for flagship project commitments and the commitments in New Decade, New Approach, as well as my own priorities.

I assure the Member that, for me, community transport is a very important service, and I think that the answer lies in collaborative working across a number of Departments and with councils.

Mr Buckley: I am glad that the Minister mentioned the dependency that many rural constituents have on community transport services. What is her assessment of the provision currently on offer for rural constituents? Furthermore, will she elaborate on the conversations that she has had with ministerial colleagues on how we can address the issue?

Ms Mallon: Community transport provides a vital service. Services have been operating under constraints, because we have seen budget restrictions imposed as a result of budget cuts to my Department. The assisted rural transport scheme is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. I administer it. I want to continue to do that, and I think that there is scope to do so, but there is a conversation to be had with a number of Executive colleagues. I have just said that about a quarter of the trips are for health appointments, so I want to have a creative and collaborative conversation with the Minister of Health.

The truth is that all our budgets are facing challenges. We need to be smarter in how we are delivering services. For me, it is particularly about going into those communities that are not able to access public transport and the other modes of transport that many of us do have access to.

Mrs Barton: Minister, I also welcome you to your position.

Will the Minister acknowledge that delays in approving departmental budgets mean that coordinating staff and those critical to providing such a high level of service will have received employment notices, and some may even be seeking more secure employment? To end such uncertainty, when will the community transport organisations be notified of the 2020-21 budget?

4.30 pm

Ms Mallon: I firmly believe that single-year budgets create a lot of pressure right across the system. They do not allow us to properly plan. They do not give certainty to people who are put on protective notice while doing vital work. I welcome the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to move to a multi-year budget, which will assist this very much. As regards the situation facing me, I do not yet know what budget I will have for the incoming year. I want to use that money to give as much certainty to people as possible, while making sure that we use it in a transformative way.

Ms Armstrong: I declare an interest, having worked in community transport for 16 years before coming to the House in 2016. I am very grateful for the Minister's words. I worked for so many years, lobbying the Committee, to try to get those words into the Department. She mentioned it being sustainable. As many in the House will know, one of the things that has happened with community transport is the ongoing threat to its existence because of the lack of clarity on operating licences. Will the Minister commit to sorting out the issue of the section 10B permit, or replicate the GB system by bringing in section 19 or section 22 community bus services? Without that clarification, community transport is dying on the vine.

Ms Mallon: I understand that there are issues around the 10B permit that continue to generate interest and concern among stakeholders. I have already had some correspondence from Members and others on that issue.

In December 2019, the High Court in London provided an important judgment — I am sure that the Member is well aware of this — on what activities can be defined as “non-commercial”. The ruling did not provide a definition of “non-commercial”, but it outlined a set of principles. My officials continue to work through that to determine the implications for Northern Ireland of that recent High Court judgement with a view to developing guidance on the matter. I realise the impact that it is having. I would like us to move to a position where we get clarity on the guidance, hopefully in a very helpful and timely manner.

Public Transport/Active Travel: Investment

3. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her plans to address the climate crisis through investment in public transport and active travel. (AQO 100/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Tackling the climate emergency is the single biggest global challenge that we face. As Infrastructure Minister, 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. Poor air quality poses a major risk to public health. Long-term exposure

to air pollution can cause chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, that affect the quality of our lives and life expectancy.

Given the impact of transport on greenhouse gas emissions and air quality, reducing congestion and decarbonising public transport must be a priority. However, we need to achieve this at a time when our public finances are constrained. So, it is vital that we work in partnership, harnessing the collective resources of our public and private sectors and civil society to deliver innovative solutions that benefit everyone.

I hope that Executive colleagues and Assembly Members recognise my Department's important role in improving lives, tackling health inequalities and protecting our environment. I look forward to us all working together, recognising that investment in infrastructure is not an end in itself. It is about people and place. It is about unlocking our economic potential, protecting our valuable environment to transform and connect lives, and improving health and well-being for all our communities across Northern Ireland. While this is a huge task, I can assure the Member that I am ambitious. Collectively, we cannot just be ambitious; we can deliver lasting change for our communities, now and for years to come.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the Minister to her post. I also congratulate her on being the first Minister to get on her bike and get in high-vis, as she did last week. That is very welcome and an example to us all. With that in mind, I ask the Minister to set out further plans for future investment in cycling, walking and the railways.

Ms Mallon: Yes, I am excited to be in the e-car, and I jumped on the e-bike as well. I would recommend the e-bike to everybody. It is a really good experience.

The Member is aware that I have set out an ambitious vision for a low-carbon future and one of my key challenges is to increase sustainable travel options for people, including rail, walking and cycling. If more people choose to turn to greener transport options, it will not only help to address climate change but make a positive contribution to general health and well-being. Over the coming weeks, I want to carefully consider how best to deliver on my active and sustainable travel ambitions. Once the Budget process provides clarity on the resources available, I will be able to firm up my objectives, and I look forward to discussing and debating them on the Floor of the House.

Miss McIlveen: The Minister will be aware that only 427 battery electric vehicles were purchased in Northern Ireland last year, and, with only 337 charging points, it is hardly a surprise. In the Ards and North Down Borough Council area, there are only eight charging points, with only three of those being in the Ards area, which, as it is a tourist destination, is not enough. If we are serious about lowering emissions, we need to get the basic infrastructure in place. Can the Minister tell the House what funding streams she is actively pursuing to assist councils in improving the current situation?

Ms Mallon: I absolutely agree with the Member. I am finding out at the coalface, given that I have an e-car, about the limited amount of infrastructure that there is. If we are serious about encouraging people to use low-emission or zero-carbon-emission vehicles, we have to

absolutely address the infrastructure. She is right: the 337 charging points are just not enough.

The Utility Regulator is looking at a report that should be helpful in trying to open up the network, and I will be taking guidance from that. I am also aware that the Department for Transport very recently announced that it will be doubling the funding available for on-street charging, which is really helpful for people who do not have access to a garage or a driveway. While we cannot draw that funding down directly, I have asked officials to work with others to support applications, and we will continue to work with the Office for Low Emission Vehicles to see if we can maximise the opportunities around that.

I have also had a conversation with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Minister Poots, and he is keen to work with me, as I am with him, because we both recognise that it is an important step forward in at least tackling the climate emergency.

Mr McGuigan: I congratulate the Minister on her appointment and welcome her views and comments on cycling and active travel. I look forward to working with her on the many issues that I have on those topics. Today is just about noting the Minister's comments on the recent announcement by Translink that it intends to use renewably-sourced hydrogen fuel, sourced from a wind farm in North Antrim — my constituency — to power buses built by Wrightbus in my constituency. Given that, does her Department have any plans to follow that lead by decarbonising ferries, particularly the Rathlin ferry in my constituency, to use hydrogen power?

Ms Mallon: Yes, I was at the launch of the three hydrogen buses at Translink. A number of Committee members were there. It is really exciting. It is the first in Ireland, and, once again, Northern Ireland is leading the way. I would like to see us do more of that; it is just amazing that we have buses and their only emission is water. We need to get more of that, and I am delighted that they could be on the road later this year.

The hydrogen ferry in Rathlin is not currently being considered, but I am very aware of the great efforts of the community there to make Rathlin a zero-carbon economy. I want to be able to play my part in that. I look forward to chairing the ministerial forum, and I really look forward to getting to Rathlin myself to meet people and to hear about their exciting plans, be it for a wind turbine or for the ferry. I am looking forward to learning more and doing what I can to assist them.

Vehicle Test Centres: Pressures

4. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has considered adopting the approach taken by the National Car Testing Service to ease the pressures faced by vehicle test centres. (AQO 101/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current situation is not acceptable, and I have instructed the DVA to work urgently to get a safe, sustainable and trusted service up and running as soon and as safely as possible. Testing on heavy goods vehicles and buses is continuing. Heavy-duty lanes are also being used, and MOT centre opening hours are being extended to prioritise taxis and four-year-old cars for private customers and dealerships. All other customers, except those with taxis or four-year-old cars,

are being automatically issued with an MOT exemption certificate, which they can use to tax their vehicle and thereby continue to drive. Two new lifts have been installed to provide additional capacity, and three existing lifts have also been independently inspected and cleared for use. I am determined to explore all options to minimise the disruption to customers, but the safety of staff and customers will continue to be my top priority.

The roadworthiness test is part of a wider regime designed to ensure that vehicles are kept in a safe and environmentally acceptable condition during their use. In Northern Ireland, we have no powers to omit the underbody inspection of a vehicle test, which is what is happening in the South, but I have powers under the Road Traffic Order to issue temporary exemption certificates for the whole test, which I moved quickly to do. That also allows drivers to tax their vehicle and stay on the road. My approach to issuing certificates of temporary exemption is a measured one that minimises disruption to customers, provides capacity to test priority vehicles and allows the space to put in place sustainable measures to restore a full, safe vehicle testing service. I am committed to doing that, but I must ensure the health and safety of staff and road users.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Minister acknowledge that parity with the South's testing system for cars would greatly alleviate the pressure and backlog facing MOT centres and potentially save the Department from some of the spending envisaged for a new network of test centres?

Ms Mallon: As for parity with the South, if we are talking about partial MOT testing, that is not possible. It was one of the options that I explored, but it was not possible given the legislation here. I would not have been able to extend the temporary exemption certificates, which would not have allowed people to tax their vehicle and keep it on the road. The issuing of temporary exemption certificates was the right decision for us.

The Member will be aware that I am considering all the options, one of which is a move from once-a-year tests for four-year-old cars to 10-year-old cars to tests every two years. I want to explore every single option to try to resolve the situation and get us to a better place.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the Minister to her post and look forward to her visiting north Down to see the numerous problems that we have in relation to infrastructure. Does the Minister agree that it is difficult to understand how all vehicle lifts in test centres are unserviceable at present? Does that reflect poor management? I would appreciate clarification on the measures that she has proposed in relation to the testing of four-year-old cars, taxis and trade vehicles.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I think that that was two questions. The Minister may choose to answer one or the other.

Ms Mallon: It is just not possible to issue four-year-old vehicles with a temporary exemption certificate. I am as frustrated as, I am sure, the Member is about that. The measures that I have put in place are to prioritise the MOT testing of four-year-old vehicles with individual customers and car dealerships. We have utilised heavy-duty lanes for priority vehicles. We are looking at extended opening on Sundays, again to prioritise four-year-old vehicles. We are trying to do what we can.

I am concerned that we got to a point where cracks were noticed for the first time in November past and we have escalated so quickly to the situation that we now find ourselves in. That is why the measures that I have put in place to address the situation include two reviews. One review is by auditors and is independent of my Department. I want to understand what happened, who knew what and when, and what action was taken. A key part of that will be the contract that was involved for the inspections. The second review is via the appointment of independent engineers, whom I have asked to provide me with independent expert advice about the steps that I need to put in place to get our MOT centres fully and safely operable as quickly as possible.

4.45 pm

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

Residents' Parking: Holylands

T1. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what assessment her Department has made of the success or otherwise of the residents-only parking scheme in the Holylands area. (AQT 71/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member raises a very important issue. The very first residents' parking scheme, as I understand it, was in the Rugby Road area of Belfast. That is being evaluated. I know there are requests for residents' parking schemes in a number of places. I want to get the assessment of the Rugby Road one. I want to understand what works and what does not so that we are applying best practice and learning as we try to roll the schemes out into other areas if that is what communities wish.

Mr Stalford: I thank the Minister for that reply, and I was remiss to not welcome her to her place. There is no doubt that the residents of Rugby Road think the scheme has worked. The Minister represents a city constituency, like myself, and she is aware that in communities like Sandy Row, the Markets and Donegall Pass there is a real desire for these schemes. Will the Minister ensure that the assessment of the success of the Rugby Road scheme is carried out as expeditiously as possible so that we can get this rolling for people living in inner-city communities in Belfast?

Ms Mallon: Yes, I am very mindful that the fact that we did not have an Assembly or Executive for three years, means that we are behind on a number of things. I want to be able to expeditiously look at things, but I will also look to the Member and other Members to help me engage with local communities, because these schemes can and will work only if they are done with the consent of the community. I look forward to, no doubt, getting letters from the Member inviting me out —

Mr Stalford: They have already been written.

Ms Mallon: — to meet residents and to discuss that very issue, and I will be very happy to do so.

Yellow Weather Warning: Contingencies

T2. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, with storm Ciara bringing rain, high winds and localised

flooding over the weekend, while today we have snow, and recognising the great work that her Department did over the weekend, to outline what contingencies she has implemented in response to the yellow warning that is in place for the next few days. (AQT 72/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The worst of the heavy rainfall associated with the storm fell across the west. Critical information on potential impacts as a result of the rainfall was shared with key partner organisations to raise awareness, and my Department played a key role in establishing the effective multi-agency emergency response to the storm.

My Department also placed staff on standby, opened control centres and maintained a presence at key known vulnerable locations that were considered to be at risk to enable a prompt emergency response, which, ultimately, involved the deployment of over 2,000 sandbags. The effort by staff was huge, and I put on record my thanks and appreciation to them, because they have worked tirelessly to keep us all safe.

This week, weather warnings have been issued by the Met Office for wind and snow until the middle of the week, with a few centimetres of snow forecast for ground around or above 150 m. Any snow accumulations over lower ground are likely to be temporary. However, icy surfaces will be an additional hazard.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for that response. I am sure all constituents will feel a great deal of comfort at her Department's level of preparedness. In my constituency of Foyle, there has been some localised flooding. One of the reasons for that was blocked gullies. Will the Minister commit to looking in to unblocking those gullies in the Derry city area?

Ms Mallon: I have been advised that culvert inlet grills were cleared and gullies were maintained as part of my Department's proactive preparatory work ahead of Storm Ciara and that that did, indeed, reduce the risk of flooding in many locations across Northern Ireland. However, I recognise the concerns the Member raised about her constituency, and I will ask officials to get in touch with her to assess the situation.

Glider Service: North Belfast Route

T4. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, after wishing her well in her new role and reminding her that all politics is local, with them both serving as North Belfast MLAs, for an update on the Glider service and to state whether a route has been decided on, and, if not, when that will happen. (AQT 74/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Glider service was launched in September 2018, and the Gliders produce 30% less emissions than the buses that they replaced. It is proving to be extremely popular, with 45,000 additional passenger journeys, and I want to build on this success. The north-to-south Belfast Glider route is one of the projects identified for inclusion in the Belfast region city deal. The next stages will require close working across all Departments and with the other Belfast region city deal partners to try to find agreement on funding on which projects are most capable of being delivered, but, to that end, my officials are also working closely with the councils and with other partners to take forward a feasibility and options appraisal, which will help

in identifying route options. This work should be completed by the end of the year.

No decision has yet been made on the north Belfast route, and I understand that we will have different views across the constituency. I am keen to learn from the Glider experience in phase 1, so I think that it is very important that, when we have the feasibility and options appraisal around the preferred routes, I do take time out to consult with people across north Belfast to make sure that we are making the best decision that can benefit the maximum number of people in north Belfast.

Ms P Bradley: If it is decided that the route will go along the Antrim Road and not the Shore Road, will the Minister undertake to look at at least one extra train halt? We have two train stations in north Belfast — Whiteabbey and Yorkgate — and the park-and-ride at both of those is packed to capacity. There is certainly value and merit in looking seriously at at least one extra train halt.

Ms Mallon: I can certainly see the merits in the case for an additional train halt. North Belfast is one of the places that is very much disconnected, and I think that we could be doing so much more to connect it with public transport, not least with rail. I have been in meetings with North Belfast Members, and I know of their passion for the place and share it.

There is a case to be made for Yorkgate station, where a lot of work could be done. There is a case to be made for transport-led regeneration in areas like North Belfast, South Belfast and a whole range of constituencies. It is something that I want to consider, but I have to be realistic as well. I have inherited a severely frustrating budget. There are many things that I would really like to do that I think are worth doing and which we should be investing in, but I have to always assess the priorities.

There are flagship Executive projects that I am committed to, there are commitments in New Decade, New Approach, and then there are my priorities on top of that, I assure the Member that maximising public transport, getting people out of cars and on foot and onto bikes and getting them to use public transport, be it bus or rail, is really important to me. I want to do as much as I can within those constraints.

Winter Gritting Schedule

T5. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that we have had a mild winter so far, albeit with storm Ciara and the possibility of snow this week, whether she has any plans for her Department to review the winter gritting schedule, particularly to ensure that the routes to rural schools are treated. (AQT 75/17-22)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I ask Members who wish to have a conversation to please do so outside of the Chamber. I am trying to listen to the Member who is asking the question, as I am sure other Members are.

Ms Mallon: The winter gritting service is critically important, and, again, I pay tribute to the staff who are involved in that and who are working through the night to keep us all safe.

I am going to sound like a broken record here, but it is because I am being honest. The winter service budget is another area that is under severe pressure. We are reliant on in-year monitoring bids, and that is not sustainable

going forward. If I am quoting correctly from the figures, 28% of the road network is gritted, which covers about 80% of the traffic. Yes, I would like to do more, particularly around rural schools, but again it comes back to that issue of budget. If we were to increase the network that we were gritting, we could see a doubling of the budget that is required to do that.

I would like to do more, and that is probably going to be a mantra, but there are budget constraints. We can look at things on an individual basis as well. Some Members mentioned to me the issue of funerals in rural areas, and there is stuff that we can do with councils on gritting work. It is an area that I am aware of. I do recognise the importance of it, and, again, I want to do as much as I can, but I operate within a very restricted budget.

Mr McGuigan: I understand that the Minister may not have the information at hand, but she did say that achieving greater winter gritting would require a doubling of the budget. How much is that in monetary terms?

Ms Mallon: I do not know whether I have the figures here, but I can follow up in writing with them. My understanding is that the current budget is maybe £5 million to £7 million to grit 28% of the road network. That covers 80% of the traffic. If I were to move to, say, 100%, you are talking about £10 million. Those are the figures that I have. I will double-check and follow up in writing.

Strabane: Footbridge

T6. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, after congratulating her on her new post and thanking her for her statement on the development of the Great North Road in Strabane, which was very important to those who lobbied for that improvement, for an update on the footbridge from the Strabane depot to the centre of Strabane town. (AQT 76/17-22)

Mr McHugh: Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leis an Aire ina post úr, agus ba mhaith liom fosta buíochas a ghabháil léi as a ráiteas ar maidin.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his kind words. I appreciate them very much.

I understand his interest in the issue. A number of Members for West Tyrone have written to me about the footbridge. I can confirm that my officials are actively engaging with Derry City and Strabane District Council to develop further the concept and design for the footbridge. As I said, I know that the matter is very important to a number of MLAs and to the people of Strabane, and I want to do what I can to progress the situation, but it has to be part of the city deal package. Therefore, at present, until the heads of terms for the city deal have been finalised, it is not possible for me to give any more definitive information on it.

Mr McHugh: I ask the Minister to appreciate just how important the footbridge is to the centre of Strabane town. It crosses the River Mourne. Currently, it is quite a distance to walk from the main shopping centre to the bus depot. The development of the bridge would be significant, not only to traders in Strabane but to people who come to the town by bus. It would encourage them to use public transport, because they could easily access the shopping centres at the same time.

Ms Mallon: I recognise the merits of the project. It sits very well with my priorities on connecting people, encouraging people to be active and sustainable transport. For all those reasons, I see its merits. I need to work within the city deal funding. I want to do what I can. I look forward to being down in Strabane to see some of the designs for myself and to meet the Member and others to hear about the importance of the project.

Street Lights

T7. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she realises that a lot of people are left in the dark out on the streets and to advise what plans there are to restore street lighting, given that over 1,000 street lights in his North Down constituency have been out for a number of months, which, given that we are told that this is due to the non-availability of an external contractor, the Minister will agree is unacceptable. (AQT 77/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member touches on a very important issue. The reality is that it takes £3.5 million per annum to carry out a full street-lighting repair system. The current budget allocated is £1 million. We have 12,000 streets lights out right across Northern Ireland. Before the severe budgetary situation was imposed on the Department, there was an internal team and external contractors. The external contractors had to be let go. The truth is that we are operating with a team of five full-time and three part-time workers, who are servicing all the street lights across Northern Ireland.

It is a situation of grave importance. I very much believe that if we are to demonstrate to people that having an Assembly and Executive makes a big difference in their lives, one of the ways in which to do that is to address quickly the street-lighting issue and to fix potholes in the roads. They may not be the most transformative projects in the world, but they are really important to people.

I have a bilateral meeting with Minister Murphy tomorrow. I will be making those points to him, because it is not just in my interest as the Minister who is responsible but in the Executive's interest to do much more to switch our lights back on.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes topical questions. Members should take their ease while we change the Chair.

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

5.00 pm

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I refer you to Question Time and the questions to the Minister of Finance. I ask that the Speaker's Office reviews Hansard, because it is my belief that, at a point, Mr Murphy referred to me as "a hypocrite". Further, it is my understanding that such language has previously been deprecated when Members have used it and the Chair has taken a stance. I refer you to two incidents and two previous rulings by the Speaker on 24 November 2009 and 3 October 2016. I ask that the suitability and the parliamentary nature of the language deployed by the Minister be explored.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for raising the point of order. Good conduct and order in the Chamber is covered by Standing Order No 65, and it

refers to the use of unparliamentary language. 'Rules of Behaviour and Courtesies in the House' also talks about the standards of debate:

"The Assembly does not observe the concept of some expressions being deemed 'unparliamentary'. Instead, the Chair requires Members to show each other respect in the Chamber, whether they are on their feet or seated."

In the context of what you have said about previous rulings and precedent, Mr Allister, I will raise this with the Speaker's Office and ask for Hansard to be reviewed. We will report back as to whether remedial action will need to be taken on the matter. I hope that satisfies the Member.

Private Members' Business

NICE Guidance on Fertility

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the serious emotional distress felt by those experiencing fertility problems in our society; notes that the Department of Health has endorsed the 2013 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) clinical guideline on fertility (CG156); commends the efforts of those campaigning for the full implementation of NICE guidance on in vitro fertilisation (IVF); welcomes the commitment within New Decade, New Approach to make three cycles of IVF treatment available on the NHS; and calls on the Minister of Health to implement fully, as a matter of urgency, the NICE guidance on fertility, including making three cycles of IVF available as committed to in New Decade, New Approach. — [Mr Gildernew.]

Which amendments were:

No 1: Insert after "urgency":

"and with immediate effect for women aged 35 years and up to threshold age of 40," — [Mr Durkan.]

No 2: At end insert:

", and to implement a fertility education and information programme similar to the Scottish Government's Your Future Fertility programme." — [Mrs Cameron.]

Ms Armstrong: IVF is very personal to me. I have not hidden the fact that I have been through the process myself. I can only pay tribute to the patience, kindness and professionalism of the Regional Fertility Centre, which looked after me for nine years.

IVF is painful, it is emotional and it is devastating. I, unfortunately, was not able to have a child as a result of IVF. All I can say is that it is not something I regret doing. I thank Fairness in Fertility. Jemma Dolan mentioned the event that they held in the Long Gallery, and that brought back a lot of memories for me. I also thank the Fertility Network, which has worked extremely hard to get this brought forward for people in Northern Ireland.

To anyone who is wondering, "Why three rounds of IVF?", I say that, often, people will find, when they go through IVF, that it takes time to get the right drug mix in place in order for IVF to work. When you go through IVF, there may well be a case that there is a failure to obtain any embryos. There are fresh and frozen embryos. I did not have any fresh transfers done, because I had developed, as many do, ovarian hyperstimulation. That means that you end up full of fluid and, normally, in hospital for a week or more. It is not an easy process to go through.

The three rounds are important because the medication may take time to settle down, and the first time is not always the first one that works — anybody it does work for, congratulations to them. When you say to somebody, "No, we will take away the opportunity for you to ever have your own child", it is better for them to hear that from a doctor than from a bank manager. The three rounds are important. Not everybody will take the three rounds, because, once you get pregnant, that will be it, and, hopefully, you have a healthy pregnancy and your baby or babies at the end of it. However, there are others who

would like to continue their family. For some of us who have fertility issues, the three rounds are important.

We have to be realistic, and I appreciate that the Minister will have competing priorities. Some of the investment may have to come from Education, and amendment No 2 mentions "fertility education". We need to be honest with our young people and say that fertility and that aspect of life does not always go smoothly. There are many people who find out that they have secondary infertility following a miscarriage, when the process after miscarriage has left them infertile. It is something that we should consider taking forward with our Minister of Education to ensure that people are told exactly what can and cannot happen when it comes to fertility. I am grateful that that amendment is there, because, if somebody had told me in my teenage years what the future would hold, I probably would not have believed them, but, at least, I would have been prepared and known where to go to seek support.

As you can imagine, having gone through the process and having been a bereavement counsellor for a number of years, I have spoken to quite a number of women. Many people who are going through the process have said to me, "Am I out? Is this not going to happen for me? I didn't get any embryos", or, when they did the frozen transfer, that was it — it was all over and done with. Many people are asking, "Can we find out as soon as possible, Minister, when this will take place?". Amendment No 1 alludes to that and the time pressure from the age of 35.

I say this to the Minister: the technical, medical solution is available for those of us who have fertility problems. It is something that we will all go for, but, before somebody remortgages their house, they want to find out how quickly it might come forward. I appreciate that there are a lot of priorities. Some people will say, "What's this fertility thing? Cancer is more important" or, "Heart problems are more important" or, "Looking after people is more important". It should not be like that. When part of your body does not work and is letting you down and when society expects you to have a family and we have a system that can help us through that, we should offer it to people in Northern Ireland, especially given the fact that their sisters or friends in Scotland can have the same thing. All I ask of the Minister is this: I know that you have a lot of pressures, especially with your budget, but, when you are considering this coming in, let people know, so that those who are stuck in that situation — those who are 35 or 36, who maybe have done one round and are thinking about going through for their second or have not yet had their first round — know whether to remortgage their house or wait.

Miss Woods: I will not take too much of your time this evening. As we know, commitments were given years ago to work towards implementing the optimum number of cycles recommended by NICE guidelines. However, we are still waiting, as we are for a lot of things here. We have waited for long enough, especially since we are frequently told that the situation is under review. The Government need to live up to the commitments in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document and the calls for the three cycles to be accessed here in Northern Ireland on the NHS.

We know how expensive it is for people in the system and the costs that people go through — personally and financially. We know that multiple rounds of IVF increase the chances of having a baby, and we know from research that multiple cycles increase the chances. In a study in

Australia, it was reported that two thirds of women under 35 would be pregnant after three cycles. Whilst we need to be mindful of those statistics, when looking at increasing the numbers of IVF cycles available in Northern Ireland, it is important that same-sex couples are included in the guidance and provision. There must be adequate funding, and the regional fertility clinic must be properly resourced and have adequate capacity to reflect the demand, especially for other programmes.

I will end with a short shout-out to a couple of my friends. A few weeks ago, following IVF, they welcomed a baby to the world. They would be very grateful if more rounds were available on the NHS to people, and they have commended the NHS on the aftercare that they received. Welcome to the world, baby Jenna. You are much loved, and I cannot wait to see you soon.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In years to come, she will be able to look herself up in Hansard. Well done to the Member.

Mr Carroll: I am glad to have the opportunity to support greater access to fertility treatment. We know that the issue has caused great distress to a great many people and couples, and we heard that today. I am sure that those who are struggling to conceive will feel a bit of relief that their journey to conception may become a lot more hopeful from today onwards.

I pay tribute to the campaigners who have been fighting for the change for years. Many have shared their heartbreaking experiences, and many have given up their time to gather signatures, to protest and to meet politicians. They were told that we did not have the money to offer more cycles, but they kept up the fight. They were told by previous Health Ministers that they might get just one more cycle but only if budgets allowed, yet they kept up the fight. If we see three free cycles of IVF on the NHS, it will be because of the hard work, sustained pressure and passion of those campaigners, many of whom will never be able to avail themselves of the changes because time has passed. We owe them a debt.

I am concerned, of course, that the Minister of Health said recently that the Regional Fertility Centre did not currently have the capacity to meet the need if the Department grants three cycles of IVF on the NHS. We need urgent action to address that issue to ensure that there is absolutely no hold-up in offering more cycles of IVF via the NHS. Similarly, we must ensure that any changes to IVF access do not see more barriers erected for people who are struggling to become parents — for example, having to prove that one has been trying to get pregnant for up to two years could present obvious and unnecessary barriers for lesbian and trans couples.

We in People Before Profit support access for couples and those who are single, regardless of their sexuality and as late as is considered possible by health experts. We also believe that we should roll out a fertility education and information programme but that it must be inclusive and up to date.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the Members who tabled the motion, which provides us with the opportunity to consider the commitment made in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document to provide three funded cycles of IVF, as well as those who tabled the amendments and those who have spoken here today. I am pleased to

see that commitment; in fact, as has been stated during the debate, it was my party that requested and secured the statement in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

When a debate in this place is broken by Question Time, it is often difficult to keep the thread, the interest and the momentum going, so I thank Members for retaining the interest in this subject, because it is very emotive and sensitive, as the Chair of the Health Committee said in his opening comments. It has touched many of us, but the personal contribution that we have just heard from Ms Armstrong brings it home to those listening to the debate and to those of us still in the Chamber that, when we speak in here, we speak from a personal approach and a lived experience that bring realism to the topics that we debate. I pay tribute to Rachel's friends and family who have been successful.

For too long, women and hopeful couples in Northern Ireland have had to experience the imbalance in IVF provision far below that which is often available in other parts of the United Kingdom. If there is any Minister in the Executive who is committed to delivering this policy, it is me. However, significant additional funding will be required to make it happen. As with other 'New Decade, New Approach' commitments, this will be an issue for the Executive to take forward collectively. However, it is not just money that is needed. As has been stated, the regional fertility clinic, which is the only Health and Social Care provider of IVF treatment in Northern Ireland, has advised me that it has neither the physical capacity nor the staffing resources to offer the additional cycles at this minute in time. Although those are significant constraints, I am keen to find a way to give effect to the commitment that has been made to those struggling with fertility issues in Northern Ireland. I am, therefore, establishing, as a matter of urgency, an operational working group to consider and cost all pathways and methods for providing those cycles and to report back to me with options.

That will include the scoping of delivery options; the eligibility of women who have already undergone publicly funded treatment or who are already on the waiting list; the funding requirements; and an implementation plan for timescale.

5.15 pm

I have been asked whether the independent sector, either locally or abroad, could be used to help deliver the extra cycles. I cannot give a definitive answer at this stage, but the working group will consider that option. However, assisted reproduction is a heavily regulated service, so if any women were sent abroad for treatment, it would have to be to somewhere that operates to the same standards as those set out by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in the United Kingdom.

I understand that fertility is a time-limited biological function and that achieving a successful pregnancy becomes more difficult as a woman grows older, so I appreciate the urgency of the issue, particularly for women who are nearing the upper age limit for publicly funded treatment but who still wish to start or grow their family. On that note, I have been asked about the possibility of expediting treatment for those women in such a situation who are on the waiting list. I can advise that the policy for some years has been, in the interests of fairness, that women have been treated in chronological order

from the date they were added to the waiting list. To give preference to older women might be seen to disadvantage younger women who would have to wait longer and would themselves be older when they receive their treatment, which could reduce their chances of success. But nothing is ruled out at this stage, and the working group will also look at whether the three cycles can be immediately introduced for older women in the 35 to 40-year age group. So, if there is a fair way, we will expedite treatment for older women on the waiting list.

It is also critical that we support women to prepare for a healthy pregnancy. Indeed, key recommendations by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) in its 2017 review of the maternity strategy focused on strengthening preconceptual care. Those recommendations included putting in place a pathway for preconceptual care, including for women with specific medical conditions, and reviewing the role of primary care in the provision of pre-pregnancy counselling to high- and low-risk women. I intend to commence a review of maternity and neonatal services shortly and will ensure that my officials carefully consider progress on those important issues as part of that review.

Like other Members, I have received a lot of correspondence surrounding this commitment both from Members, at a cross-party level, and from the public. I recognise there is a lot of interest in and support for this commitment. To that end, I welcome the support of all the parties when the Executive need to make decisions to allocate the funding to enable the provision of extra IVF cycles for eligible women.

To conclude, I assure Members that I am committed to the implementation of the New Decade, New Approach pledge subject to the necessary funding being made available by the Executive, and, as has been indicated in the House, all Members and all parties seem to be supportive of that desire.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister. Just to let him know, Kellie Armstrong, as the Alliance Chief Whip, had to go to the Business Committee, otherwise I am sure she would have been in for the remainder of the debate. I call Paula Bradley to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 2.

Ms P Bradley: I do not intend to stay on my feet for too long because I think there is a consensus from everyone in the Chamber on the motion and the two amendments.

I thank the Members facing me for bringing the motion to the Assembly, the Members responsible for amendment No 1, and my colleague Pam Cameron for amendment No 2. I wish the new Chair of the Health Committee all the very best in his role. You should do a much better job than the last one, so good luck with that, and good luck to Pam also as your vice chair.

There is not much more for me to say because I could not possibly follow Kellie Armstrong's very heartfelt speech in the Chamber. It is always very positive for us, as MLAs, to share the experiences we have in life. I know the Minister himself has shared his own experiences in the House, as have others, and I think it shows we have empathy with our voters and the people who elect us. As the Chair of the Health Committee said when he opened, this is a very emotive and sensitive matter. I very much hope that all parties get behind you, as Minister, in bringing this forward.

I just want to make a couple of comments. I was one of the originals in 2012 — it seems like such a very long time ago — when this Committee motion, as it was then, was brought forward. Pam and I both spoke on it because it was something, back then, when we first became MLAs in 2011, that we wanted to see pushed forward. We were knocking on Edwin Poots's door on a daily basis on this because we both sat on the all-party group on fertility at that time. It is rather sad that we have not seen much progress between since then until now. I welcome that progress and the issue's being included in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

I also welcome the support for amendment No 2. The sexual health strategy and informing people better was mentioned earlier. We have not had a sexual health strategy here in so many years. An addendum to the original one was put down in 2012 or 2013, but we need to take that more seriously for so many reasons, and this is just one of them. There are many other reasons why we need to have that strategy and awareness in place. We can break down taboos when we talk about infertility and our sexual health.

I very much welcome being part of the debate and I thank everybody for their humility. I want to say a special thank you to Kellie Armstrong for her contribution today.

Mr McGrath: I will begin by welcoming the Minister's announcements in his remarks on an operational working group to investigate the matters that we have discussed today. If it brings the answers that we have been seeking, we will be able to demonstrate to people out there that devolution works, and that is a very positive message to be able to send out across the North. I also welcome the Minister's remarks about trying to support women in the upper age category. I know that that will provide some succour to people out there, and, hopefully, that will help them in what will be a very traumatic situation for them, too.

I welcome the opportunity to have this debate. Members across the House have said almost in unison today that there is an identifiable problem that needs to be addressed. We are aware of the issues, and most contributors referred to them. We know that there are mental health problems associated with infertility. We know that there is a disparity between us and other devolved regions, and we want to seek equality. We understand, and have mentioned, the unfair financial burden that couples and families are put under as a result of the situation. It is a taboo subject. The mere fact that we are having the debate and that there will be video clips of it will, hopefully, send a message that we are taking the issue seriously, that we are prepared to have conversations about it and, therefore, that people and their friends and families and communities should be able to have those conversations too. We understand and appreciate that there will be an additional financial requirement and that there are workforce concerns, but I hope that those issues are not insurmountable and that we will be able to work round them.

We are all people, we all have friends and we all have some personal experiences. That has given the debate a particularly personal touch, as have the remarks from Kellie Armstrong and other Members. We all know people in our friendship groups who have gone through a traumatic experience. The fact that we are trying to do what we can to help is a positive move. We can help by providing hope. If this motion and these amendments

are passed, we will provide hope for people in desperate situations who are looking for that hope. My appeal is that we do the right thing and support hope for those who are facing the perils of infertility.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Karen Mullan. As she is winding up, she will have 10 minutes.

Ms Mullan: I thank everyone who took part in the debate, and I thank the Minister for being present for its entirety.

I am pleased to wind on the motion on this extremely sensitive issue. Many will be listening and hoping for a positive outcome and full implementation of NICE guidance on fertility as a matter of urgency. As acknowledged by Members, infertility is a medical and social condition that can cause considerable social, emotional and psychological distress. The psychological and emotional repercussions of infertility cannot be overstated. In some instances, infertile women can experience severe or clinically significant distress. That can manifest in depression, anxiety, sexual anxiety and difficulty, relationship problems with partner, family and friends, and an increased sense of self-blame and guilt.

As was outlined, couples and individuals experiencing fertility problems do not need the extra financial burden and stress. For those experiencing infertility, the commitment given to prioritise three funded cycles of IVF in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document was very much welcomed.

In October 2018, local group Fairness (IN) Fertility handed over a petition with over 10,000 signatures to the Department of Health calling for equal access to fertility. Fairness (IN) Fertility was established by Derry woman Deborah Cross along with her husband, Stephen. Deborah wanted to break the silence, highlight the inequality in provision across these isles and the unjust financial burden, and provide support to women and couples going through IVF.

The group's activities include lobbying, raising awareness, advocacy, emotional well-being, support and information. I have attended many events organised by the group and heard about the personal and financial stress and the emotional and mental impact that it has on women and men. I have heard of the pain of their family never being complete and of the pain of missing out: missing out on the joy of that baby announcement, many family celebrations and many first days.

Like others, I commend the work of Fairness (IN) Fertility and other support groups that have continued to ensure that this long-standing inequality is kept on the agenda. In particular, I thank Deborah Cross and the members of Fairness (IN) Fertility who shared their personal and painful stories to improve service provision.

Kellie outlined the importance of the three cycles. I join Members in thanking Kellie for sharing her personal experience, which she has done on many occasions. Pam Cameron and Paula Bradley mentioned the importance of education. I thank them for tabling their amendment. Jemma Dolan highlighted the limited fertility counselling support available. That is an issue that also needs to be addressed.

Over the past number of weeks, I and a number of MLAs have queried details on the Department's plans, timeline and capacity to commence and deliver. That shows the

overwhelming level of support that exists in the Assembly and across our constituencies.

The Regional Fertility Centre at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast is the only centre in the North to provide publicly funded IVF cycles. As was raised, there are issues with funding and capacity to deliver on the commitments in New Decade, New Approach.

Again, I thank the Minister for being present for the debate, and for his understanding of those going through infertility. I welcome the setting up of the operational group and how quickly you have turned that around, Minister. That will give much comfort to people watching the debate, because, as Members said, there is a lot of interest. As part of that, Minister, I ask that you consider the amendment from Mark Durkan and Sinead Bradley to look at a short-term measure related to age profile.

I call on Members to support the motion and both amendments. I appeal to the Minister to work as quickly as possible to full implementation of NICE guidance, which will change the lives of so many affected by infertility.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the serious emotional distress felt by those experiencing fertility problems in our society; notes that the Department of Health has endorsed the 2013 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) clinical guideline on fertility (CG156); commends the efforts of those campaigning for the full implementation of NICE guidance on in vitro fertilisation (IVF); welcomes the commitment within New Decade, New Approach to make three cycles of IVF treatment available on the NHS; and calls on the Minister of Health to implement fully, as a matter of urgency and with immediate effect for women aged 35 years and up to threshold age of 40, the NICE guidance on fertility, including making three cycles of IVF available as committed to in New Decade, New Approach, and to implement a fertility education and information programme similar to the Scottish Government's Your Future Fertility programme.

Adjourned at 5.30 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Written Ministerial Statements

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Department of Finance

Special Adviser Appointments

Published at 1.00 pm on Monday 20 January 2020.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The role of Special Adviser is an important feature of modern government. They can offer politically-informed advice to Ministers, ensure co-ordination across Departments through liaising with other special advisers, and act as a link between the Minister and the party that has appointed them to Office.

It is essential that Special Advisers are subject to, and adhere to, the high standards expected of those in public life. Given the public's legitimate concerns in this regard I have moved quickly to produce and agree strengthened rules. Today the Executive approved a new suite of documents governing the employment and conduct of special advisers.

The Special Adviser Code of Conduct has been revised:

- there is a new overarching introduction making clear the critical role special advisers have in supporting ministers and that they are an important part of the team, working closely alongside other civil servants to deliver Ministers' priorities. This section also requires Special Advisers to serve the Executive as a whole, not just their own Minister;
- the Code makes very clear that Ministers are responsible for the management, conduct and discipline of their special advisers;
- it requires special advisers to keep good records and use official email accounts; and
- it requires special advisers to publish their meetings with external organisations, and gifts and hospitality received. There will be an annual statement of the cost of special advisers, including any severance paid and salaries of those in the two highest paybands will be published. Special advisers will also be required to declare any conflicts of interest.

There is a new statutory Code for Appointment. Reflecting the personal nature of the appointment, it does not prescribe the process by which the Minister selects a special adviser. The Code for Appointment makes clear that civil service involvement commences at the point at which the Minister advises the Department of the name of the person they wish to appoint as their special adviser

The Special Adviser Letter of Appointment clarifies the responsibility of the Minister for the management, conduct and discipline of the special adviser. And it makes clear

that the NICS Code of Ethics will apply to special advisers, excluding – as always – the requirements of impartiality and objectivity.

The scheme for the Remuneration of Special Advisers transfers responsibility for determining pay to Department of Finance officials, as this department has overall responsibility for determining pay policy and conditions of employment for NICS employees. The Minister of Finance will have no involvement in the setting of salaries including those of Special Advisers. There will be three paybands, and the maximum in the highest payband will be £85k per annum. Starting salaries in paybands 2 and 3 will normally be at the bottom of the payband. No Special Adviser will earn more than a Minister. In addition, Special Advisers who leave their post will not receive severance pay if they take up another publicly-funded role.

These new rules should go some way to restoring public confidence in these institutions. I am pleased that all parties in the Executive have signed up to these codes. It is now essential that these rules and the values that underpin them are put into practice.

Department of Health

Response to the Emergence of Coronavirus (2019 NCov)

Published on Friday 24 January 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Members will be very well aware of the emergence and subsequent spread of Coronavirus emanating from Wuhan in China. I believe it is of the utmost importance to provide a timely update to the Assembly on the global impact and the response to date, as well as informing you of the range of measures that my Department and the Public Health Agency have initiated in order to protect the health of the people of Northern Ireland.

I participated in the COBRA meeting today with my counterparts from across the UK supported by the Chief Medical Officer to discuss the situation in Wuhan, China, and elsewhere in Asia. I provided an update on the planning and preparation in Northern Ireland. This is a rapidly changing picture. However as of noon today there were approximately 830 confirmed cases and 25 deaths in China. A number of cases have also been confirmed in other countries in South East Asia as well as one in the United States. There are no confirmed cases in the UK at this time. It is anticipated that there will be increasing numbers of people across the UK being tested, given the transport links to China, the fact that this is the peak time for respiratory illness and the need for a precautionary approach to be taken in all potential cases. Due to patient confidentiality, Trusts will not comment on individual cases but the public can be assured that there are well established protocols for dealing with infectious diseases.

In respect of measures to protect the health of the public in Northern Ireland. I can inform members that my Department along with the PHA are in contact with the relevant authorities across the UK to ensure that we have a fully coordinated and effective response to the management of Coronavirus. I have also been in contact with my fellow Health Ministers to discuss our approach. Moreover, my officials have been in contact with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland in order to ensure that there is appropriate coordination and cooperation between the two jurisdictions.

The PHA are working with the HSCB primary care and Trusts to ensure the appropriate testing, clinical pathways and communication lines are in place for dealing with any suspected cases in Northern Ireland. We will continue to ensure they have access to the most up to date scientific and medical evidence and guidance on these issues. I will be liaising with Executive colleagues to ensure advice is provided to other organisations as is required.

Finally, it is important to stress that we have faced similar situations in Northern Ireland before. Members will be aware of SARS in 2003, Pandemic Influenza in 2009 and Ebola in 2014. In each case, robust health protection measures as well as our highly skilled professionals in health and social care have ensured that our population has been protected against global public health threats. We have tried and tested measures in place to respond

The risk to the UK public remains low, however there can be no room for complacency. There may well be cases in the UK at some stage. I have been assured that we are well prepared for these types of incidents. I am confident that my colleagues in the Executive and across the Assembly will understand that while it is important that we remain vigilant, we need to take a proportionate response to what is an emerging issue. My priority as Minister is to ensure effective measures are in place within Northern Ireland, and that our communications with the people are informed. I will provide further statements to the Assembly in due course.

Department for Infrastructure

MOT Temporary Exemption Certificates

Published at 2.30 pm on Monday 27 January 2020.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): There is a current difficulty regarding the operation of many of the lifts within the network of 15 MOT centres which is impacting on the DVA's ability to perform tests on some cars and light vehicles, resulting in unavoidable disruption for customers.

The DVA takes health and safety very seriously to ensure both staff and customers are protected. As part of a regular preventative maintenance programme, there are minor inspections every 8 weeks and major service inspections every 6 months of the DVA's equipment, including lifts, within its MOT centres. These inspections are carried out by the DVA's equipment supplier. Given the cracks recently identified in a number of lifts, as a precautionary measure, from 22 January, the lifts are not being used until the necessary inspection and repairs have been carried out to ensure staff and customer safety. There is a repair schedule in place for all lifts and each lift is being re-inspected following the remedial repair and will be brought into operation if it passes the inspection. The position in each test centre is fluid and will change as lifts are inspected and cleared for operational use. The health and safety of staff and customers is my priority and we are also liaising with the Health and Safety Executive.

The DVA Chief Executive has also instructed the contractor to increase the frequency of inspections to every 2 weeks to keep the lift safety under constant review. Further discussions are also ongoing with the supplier about how this situation arose so suddenly and how the lifts can continue to be kept safe.

I am very mindful of the impact this disruption is having on the public and their working and daily lives and this cannot be allowed to continue. On Friday 24 January, I instructed the DVA to begin issuing Temporary Exemption Certificates (TECs) as soon as practically possible. From Monday 27 January, TECs will be issued to those customers who have expired MOTs as a result of the DVA cancelling their tests due to ongoing repair work.

These exemptions will apply from 20 January and will continue until I am satisfied test centres are operating normally again, at which point I will notify the public. The exemptions will apply for four months, allowing DVA customers to continue to go about their daily lives without further disruption. Customers will be sent reminder notices for the new expiry date well in advance, so a new free test can be booked.

There are some vehicles unfortunately that cannot avail of a temporary exemption certificate. This includes, four year old cars because they do not have an MOT certificate to extend and also taxis because legislation does not permit the DVA to issue TECs for taxis. I have therefore instructed the DVA to prioritise test appointments for four year old vehicles, which do not have an MOT certificate to extend, and taxis as an essential service. I will continue to monitor the situation very closely and ensure every effort is made to maintain staff and customer safety, while minimising disruption.

I am aware that some customers are attending for tests and are being turned away and this is causing them further inconvenience. The DVA has been making every effort to contact customers, where they have details, ahead of their appointment to cancel the appointment. Statements have also been made to the press and Nidirect website. Given the fluid nature of the position unfortunately some customers have turned up at a centre and have not been able to have their MOT carried out. The DVA has apologised and I will continue to ensure that every available option is used to notify customers as soon as possible. All customers who have their test cancelled by the DVA will receive a free retest and a refund of half of the cost of the test which is the maximum refund possible under the legislation.

I understand that this is a matter of public concern. That is why I have also instructed officials to prepare a full review into how this situation arose, the contingency planning in place and communication with the public. My priority is to put in place steps to prevent this ever happening again.

Customers who have not been contacted by the DVA to cancel their MOT test, are being asked to attend as planned. Tests are ongoing at all test centres and additional slots at weekends are being made available. Motorists are also being asked to continue to book an MOT appointment when they receive their reminder letter. This will ensure they can be issued with a TEC should the DVA need to cancel the appointment. DVA may call the vehicle for testing earlier than the new extended MOT date in order to manage demand.

It is the responsibility of the vehicle owner to ensure their vehicle is in a roadworthy condition to be used on a public road.

The DVA sincerely apologises for the impact on its customers, but health and safety of customers and staff must remain the priority. I am keeping the matter under continuous review and am liaising with the DVA Chief Executive and his team on an ongoing basis. Whilst health and safety is the absolute priority, I am also mindful of the impact on customers particularly those who require their car for work or other commitments and want to ensure that any implications for customers are minimised.

Department of Health

Response to the Emergence of Coronavirus (2019 NCov) — Update

Published at 9.00 pm on Wednesday 29 January 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Further to my written statement to the Assembly of the 24 January I gave members a commitment to provide further statements in due course. As members will be aware the novel Coronavirus emanating from Wuhan in China has continued to spread globally and we have now seen the first confirmed cases in Europe with a small number of cases in France and Germany. This remains a rapidly evolving situation, with numbers of cases changing very frequently.

There are currently no confirmed cases in the UK, and the risk to the UK public remains low. As of 2pm today, there are 130 confirmed negative results in the UK. Given the relatively small numbers at this time, we will continue to provide aggregated UK numbers to protect individual patient confidentiality. I have agreed with my UK counterparts that any confirmed UK positive result will be announced by the CMO of the region concerned, followed by a statement by the CMO for England and a Ministerial statement. It is not unreasonable to assume at some point we will have a positive case in Northern Ireland.

While the current risk is assessed as low for the UK, members will appreciate this is a rapidly evolving situation. Hence this risk assessment is under constant review. Therefore there can be no room for complacency and my priority as Minister is still to ensure effective measures are in place within Northern Ireland. To this end I have also participated in a COBRA meeting this evening which comprised of UK Government Ministers and Ministers from the Devolved Administrations. We have given our firm commitment to a coordinated approach to this extremely important issue.

The number of confirmed cases in China is increasing, not only because of new infections but also as a result of the active case identification which is part of the public health response. Clearly this is a very rapidly developing situation, with a range of figures being quoted in the worldwide press and social media. As of 2pm today, the official PHE data show 6,064 cases have been confirmed, of which 5,794 are in Mainland China. 132 people have died, and all of the deaths have been within China.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has updated their travel advice, advising against all travel to Hubei Province, and all but essential travel to Mainland China. Any Northern Ireland residents currently in China should follow the advice of the local authorities and leave if they are able to do so. The FCO is preparing to repatriate British and EU Nationals from Wuhan to the UK.

I want to reassure members that my Department and the Public Health Agency continue to work closely with the relevant authorities and public health organisations across the UK and Ireland to ensure Northern Ireland is well prepared to deal with the situation as events unfold.

My Department has issued a letter from the Chief Medical Officer providing guidance to clinical staff on what to do if they encounter patients with respiratory infections arriving from overseas, has set up an Emergency Operations Centre and has updated relevant websites.

The PHA and HSCB has also activated its Emergency Operations Centre and continues to closely monitor the situation and risk in Northern Ireland. PHA/HSCB are working closely with the Trusts, Port Health and primary care to make them aware of the incident and potential symptoms of the virus. The PHA is also working with Universities and Educational Establishments, and with the Chinese community. We will work with our colleagues in the PHA to ensure materials are updated as nationally agreed guidance evolves.

I will continue to provide further statements to the Assembly in due course.

Department of Health

Response to the Emergence of Coronavirus (2019 NCov) — Update

Published at 2.30 pm on Monday 3 February 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Further to my written statements to the Assembly of the 24 and 29 January I wanted to provide members with a further update on recent developments.

The novel coronavirus has unfortunately, as expected, continued to spread globally and on 30 January, the World Health Organisation declared the coronavirus as a global public health emergency of international concern. On the advice of the UK Chief Medical Officers the risk level in the UK has been raised from low to moderate and the Chief Medical Officer in Northern Ireland Dr Michael McBride, has issued further advice to clinical staff.

We have now also seen the first confirmed cases in the UK with two people testing positive in England. I understand both patients are well. The patients are receiving specialist NHS care, and tried and tested infection control procedures are being used to try and prevent further spread of the virus.

I want to reassure members that while the risk has been raised from low to moderate there is no cause for alarm and it does not mean we think the risk to individuals in the UK has changed at this stage, rather that we should plan for all eventualities.

As I have previously stated it is not unreasonable to assume that at some point we will have a positive case in Northern Ireland. We have been preparing for cases of novel coronavirus, we are used to managing infections and we have robust infection control measures in place to respond immediately.

I have spoken to the First and deputy First Ministers and have been assured that all the necessary resources of Government will be available to help keep our people safe. I have updated my Executive colleagues at our meeting this morning and have their full support and commitment.

I am working with other UK Ministers to ensure we coordinate our planning. My Department continues to work closely with the relevant authorities and public health organisations across the UK and the Republic of Ireland as the outbreak in China develops to ensure we are ready to deal with the situation. The CMO has also been in regular contact with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland.

This remains a rapidly evolving picture, with numbers of cases changing very frequently and as of 2 February the official PHE data shows 14,545 cases have been confirmed, of which 14,390 are in Mainland China. 305 people have died, with one of these deaths in the Philippines and the rest within China.

My priority as Minister is still to ensure all effective measures are in place within Northern Ireland and I will continue to provide further statements to the Assembly in due course.

The Executive Office

Statement by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on the Legislative Programme

Published on Monday 10 February 2020.

Ministers: Following agreement today by the Executive Committee, we wish to advise the Assembly of the legislation which we and the Ministers of the Executive Committee intend to introduce during the remainder of this 2019-20 session. In doing so we are also fulfilling the obligation placed on the Executive Committee by the New Decade New Approach Deal to publish a Legislative Programme within one month of its operation.

This Legislative Programme has been prepared following consultation with all Ministers and focusses on those legislative proposals which, on the basis of their state of readiness, we believe can be introduced as Bills before the summer recess. We would wish to emphasise that this Programme does not represent the totality of legislation which Executive Ministers expect to introduce before the end of the mandate. As the work of the Executive gains momentum, we fully anticipate the inclusion of new legislative proposals as these become more fully developed. There will also be a need to respond flexibly to Ministerial priorities and the need for legislation to deal with urgent and critical issues as these emerge.

We will therefore provide the Assembly with an update on progress and a revised Programme at an appropriate point later this year.

The Legislative Programme will therefore consist of the following Bills:

The Minister for Communities intends to introduce four Bills dealing respectively with Welfare Mitigation, Housing, Pension Schemes and Liquor Licensing.

The Welfare Mitigation/ Social Sector Size Criteria Bill will remove the current end date of 31st March 2020 in respect of mitigation payments for the Social Sector Size Criteria, usually referred to as the Bedroom Tax. This will fulfil the commitment in “The New Decade, New Approach” Deal that existing mitigation payments should continue beyond the 31st March.

The Pension Schemes Bill aims to ensure that those saving into a Master Trust scheme, which is a form of multi employer occupational pension scheme, are protected. Introduction of automatic enrolment into workplace pension schemes has seen an increase in the number of people saving for retirement. The pensions market has responded to this and, the Master Trust market in particular has developed significantly. The current regulatory regime for occupational pensions does not adequately fit with the particular characteristics and dynamics associated with Master Trusts and the Bill will therefore introduce an authorisation and supervision regime for Master Trusts and provide the Pensions Regulator with greater powers to take action where key criteria are not met.

The Bill will also remove barriers to capping excessive exit charges on savers accessing their pensions flexibly and a ban on member-borne commission charges.

The purpose of the **Housing (Amendment) Bill** is to make the changes urgently required to address the Office for National Statistics' classification of Housing Associations to the public sector. Reclassification to the private sector will allow Housing Associations to borrow money to facilitate the Social Housing Development Programme and to access Financial Transactions Capital, which supports the Co-ownership scheme, among other housing projects. Without such reclassification, all Housing Association borrowing would be charged against Executive Funds and Financial Transaction Capital would not be available.

A Licensing and Registration of Clubs Bill was introduced during the previous mandate but fell on the dissolution of the Assembly in 2017. The purpose of the proposed **Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill** is to tackle practices within the licensed trade which could contribute to alcohol misuse. It is also intended to support the hospitality sector in promoting tourism, by making its offering more sustainable and attractive. It will also recognise the role licensed premises and private registered clubs play in their local communities as places to socialise and providers of employment.

The proposals in the Bill will represent a balanced package of reforms which will:

- place restrictions on the advertising of alcoholic drinks in supermarkets and off sales premises;
- introduce occasional additional late opening for certain licensed premises and changes to holiday period opening hours for certain licensed premises and registered clubs;
- make provision for a Special Events Licence for events such as The Open Championship at Portrush;
- introduce a new category of licence for local producers of alcoholic drinks;
- introduce changes to the law affecting private members clubs.

The Minister of Finance will introduce the normal **Budget Bills** as part of the annual financial cycle.

The Minister of Justice intends to introduce a **Criminal Justice Bill** to reform the Committal process, and a **Domestic Abuse Bill**.

Committal Reform is one project within the wider 'Speeding Up Justice' programme of work. The speed that cases progress matters to victims and witnesses, their families and their communities and can help offenders to better understand the implications of their actions and create a better opportunity for rehabilitation. The **Committal Reform Bill** is designed to address the recommendation of the Fresh Start Panel by abolishing oral evidence at the 'traditional committal hearing' stage, and provide clarity about the operational outworking of direct committal.

The **Domestic Abuse Bill** will create a new domestic abuse offence and therefore close a gap in the law to ensure that protection is not limited to cases of physically violent behaviour, as at present.

This new offence will apply where there are two or more occasions of abusive behaviour against a partner, former partner or close family member. It will cover behaviour that is abusive because it is controlling or coercive or amounts to psychological, emotional or financial abuse of the other

person, and can also include behaviour that is physically violent, threatening or intimidating.

We, as First Minister and deputy First Minister, will introduce a three piece legislative package to implement commitments given in the New Decade, New Approach Deal. These will be entitled the **Northern Ireland Act 1998 Amendment No 1, 2 and 3 Bills** and will respectively:

- make provision for an Office of Identity and Cultural Expression and repeal the Administration of Justice (Language) Act 1737;
- to appoint an Irish Language Commissioner and to provide official recognition of the status of the Irish language;
- make provision to appoint a Commissioner to enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition in Northern Ireland; and make provision for a duty on the Department of Education as regards Ulster Scots.

All these legislative proposals will be subject to the established procedures for Executive referral and consideration before their introduction.

In addition, and in recognition of the interest of members in this Legislative Programme, we also intend to table a motion for an early debate on its contents.

The Rt Hon Arlene Foster MLA
First Minister

Michelle O'Neill MLA
Deputy First Minister

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 24 January 2020

Written Answers

The Executive Office

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their plans to strengthen Ministers' responsibility for Special Advisers in relation to measures agreed in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 193/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): A new Code of Conduct for Special Advisers has been agreed by the Executive. The Code specifically states that Ministers are responsible for the management, conduct and discipline of Special Advisers.

Plans to clarify these responsibilities in the Ministerial Code of Conduct and associated documents will be considered by the Executive shortly.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to provide a funding package to farmers impacted by flooding in August 2017.
(AQW 196/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I have received detailed briefing from my officials outlining my Department's response to the flooding event in the North West in August 2017. I recognise the challenges faced by affected farmers.

You will appreciate that I wish to consider carefully all the relevant issues surrounding the matter before reaching a balanced decision in due course.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures his Department is taking to safeguard the agriculture and agri-food sectors in the context of Brexit.
(AQW 200/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department has a comprehensive Brexit Programme, Chaired by the Permanent Secretary, which encompasses all aspects of the Department's responsibilities (agriculture, environment, animal and plant health, fisheries etc.)

The Programme covers primary and secondary legislation, funding and resources, future frameworks, trade, migration, communications, no trade deal preparedness and the delivery of obligations under the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol.

The Department works closely with other NICS Departments (for example, DfE and TEO) and of course has strong links into the Defra work programme and broader Whitehall Departments.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether (i) local government has control of the locations of all air quality monitors; and (ii) the information gathered is provided to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.
(AQW 261/17-22)

Mr Poots: District councils must locate air quality monitors in accordance with legislation and technical guidance. There are two air quality monitoring networks; the first of these is the Automatic Urban and Rural Network (AURN), which is used to assess compliance with EU Air Quality legislation. The location of monitoring stations in the AURN network complies with requirements set out in EU Air Quality Directives.

The second network is a Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) network, which is operated by the district councils, and is used to assess progress towards meeting objectives contained in the UK Air Quality Strategy, as is set out in the Environment Order (NI) 2002. The location of LAQM monitoring stations in this network satisfies criteria laid out in LAQM Technical Guidance, which was published in conjunction with the UK Air Quality Strategy.

All of the data obtained from these automatic monitoring stations is uploaded to the DAERA Northern Ireland Air website which can be found at this link. Thus, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has access to this data.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) any inter-departmental, local government and national level discussions his Department has had on establishing structures to co-ordinate climate change actions; and (ii) the work that has commenced.

(AQW 262/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department coordinates climate change actions through a range of established and new structures. Cross departmental discussions and action on climate change is coordinated through the 'Future Generations Group'. Further cross departmental action on climate change is driven through the Mitigation, Adaptation and Analysts sub-groups of the Future Generations Group.

My Department commissioned the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) to publish a report on 'Reducing emissions in NI'. The report sets out the CCC's recommendations on possible policy and actions that NI can take to reduce NI emissions. These recommendations are currently being considered by all NI Government Departments.

My Department works with BEIS, DEFRA, Cabinet Office, HMT and the other Devolved Administrations in order to agree and provide NI input and responses to UK Government climate change proposals, reports, negotiations, and initiatives.

In particular, my Department is currently liaising with:

- Cabinet Office on the forthcoming 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) which is to be held in Scotland in November 2020;
- HMT on their funding review of the UK target to reduce Green House Gas Emissions to net zero by 2050;
- BEIS on the future of carbon emission trading upon leaving the EU; and
- DEFRA on the development of a third Climate Change Risk Assessment.

My Department established, resources, and sits on the Steering Group of Climate Northern Ireland. Climate NI's role is to increasing understanding of climate change impacts and risks within Northern Ireland and promoting the adaptation actions necessary to address these.

My Department published NI's second cross departmental Climate Change Adaptation Programme in Sept 2019. It contains a chapter on the adaptation work being taken forward by local government and across society. My Department will complete a mid and end programme review of the Adaptation Programme.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether any air quality monitors have been moved in the last five years, including the reasons for each move.

(AQW 263/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department is aware of one air quality monitoring station which has been relocated within the last five years. A monitoring station within the Derry City & Strabane District Council area was moved in March 2016 from Brooke Park to Rosemount. Relocation was required as a result of a wider development scheme for the Victorian Park at Brooke Park by the Council. The new location at Rosemount is approximately 260 meters north of the original location of the monitor.

Department for Communities

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities to detail the way forward for the Sub Regional Stadia Programme.

(AQW 188/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Advancement of plans to complete the Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the "New Decade, New Approach" agreement.

I am fully committed to delivering on this as an Executive priority to meet the current and future needs of the game. To this end, I have asked my officials to engage widely with the football sector in developing the detailed implementation plans for the Sub Regional Stadia Programme.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how many Universal Credit claimants had to wait longer than five weeks for their first payment.

(AQW 248/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Each week approximately 860 new claims for Universal Credit become due for their first payment, with 95% of these paid at the end of that first 5 week period.

Anyone suffering financial hardship during this 5 week period can apply for an Advance Payment, with further support also available from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund or Discretionary Support.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the review of the Housing Selection Scheme.
(AQW 250/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Analysis of stakeholder feedback regarding the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations has been completed by officials. I look forward to considering the Review and possible next steps in the coming weeks.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties currently listed as uninhabitable; (ii) the total projected cost to bring these properties into a habitable state; and (iii) how many are beyond a habitable state of repair, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 251/17-22)

Ms Hargey: For the purpose of this Question, “uninhabitable properties” are defined as those that cannot be occupied as a result of: fire; vandalism; where conversion work is ongoing to facilitate letting.

A breakdown of uninhabitable properties and the cost of repair is provided, by parliamentary constituency, in the table below. No properties are beyond a habitable state of repair.

Constituency	No of Properties	Estimated Total Cost to bring to habitable state
Belfast South	1	£30k
Belfast East	4	£120k
Mid Ulster	3	£67k
South Down	1	£30k
South Antrim	3	£120k
North Antrim	1	£30k
Foyle	2	£60k
East Londonderry	2	£30k
West Tyrone	1	£30k
Total	18	£517k

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the Townscape Heritage Initiative in Carrickfergus town centre.

(AQW 271/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Carrickfergus Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) is an extremely positive regeneration scheme for the town’s Conservation Area. A key strength of the Carrickfergus THI lies in the partnerships it has fostered between property owners, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, heritage advisers from my department, and the private sector. It has therefore provided a key support to the partnerships that will deliver the substantial benefits of the Carrickfergus Regeneration Investment Programme and the proposed Belfast Region City Deal investment at Carrickfergus.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether she will initiate a review of the implementation of Universal Credit for new claimants.

(AQW 325/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Universal Credit was introduced for new claims, on a phased geographical basis between September 2017 and December 2018. This incremental approach over 14 months enabled the Department for Communities to continuously review implementation and ensure that the delivery arrangements were working effectively. The Universal Credit service is working as expected with around 95% of people receiving a first payment on time.

My Department will continue to review, evaluate and make improvements to the delivery arrangements on an ongoing basis, and I am committed to working with external stakeholders to consolidate progress. I am also committed to ensuring the broadest range of protection is available to support the most vulnerable.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to outline (i) when she expects to bring forward legislation to extend Welfare Supplementary Payments (mitigations); and (ii) the process she intends to undertake to ensure full consideration is given to what further mitigations are required.

(AQW 326/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

- (i) My Department is taking all necessary steps to ensure appropriate legislation to extend the existing welfare mitigation schemes will be in place by 31 March 2020. A date for the introduction of draft legislation to the Assembly is under consideration.
- (ii) Officials are currently developing proposals for a review of the welfare mitigation measures as detailed in the New Decade, New approach Deal. I can provide an assurance that as part of the review officials will be engaging with key stakeholders in the independent advice sector. Any proposals for further mitigations will also give due consideration to my Department's equality and human rights responsibilities. The outcome of the review will be presented to the Executive in due course.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department will consult on amending licensing laws which makes it an offence for young people to be on licensed premises after 9.00pm; and what steps she is taking to create a safe, alcohol-free environment for young people.

(AQW 330/17-22)

Ms Hargey: A public consultation on the current liquor licensing laws closed on 6 December 2019. It included questions on the adequacy of the current law in relation to children and young people on licensed premises after 9pm, for private family functions and underage functions such as formals. Any relaxation of licensing law, particularly in relation to children and young people, must be balanced with the appropriate safeguards.

Responses to the consultation are currently being analysed and an outcome report will be ready for my consideration in the very near future.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities whether she will (i) commit to offering whatever assistance she can to the Ulster Branch of the Motorcycle Union of Ireland, to ensure the future of motorcycle road racing; and (ii) facilitate an urgent meeting with officials from the MCU to discuss this issue.

(AQW 340/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department has made a substantial investment in motorcycle road racing in recent years to improve safety for both spectators and competitors. Just under £500,000 has been spent on improving facilities, procuring safety bales, kerb protectors and other safety enhancements.

In addition, funding has been provided to assist with the development of a report into all disciplines of motorsport including road racing. The report examined safety, sustainability, marketing, tourism and the economic impact of the sport.

Following the publication of the report further support is being provided to assist the 2&4 Wheel Motorsport Group, the umbrella organisation for the four Governing Bodies of Motorsport including the Ulster Branch of the Motorcycle Union of Ireland, to develop a strategy for motorsport. That work is ongoing.

My Department's priority will continue to be focused on supporting safety improvements where appropriate.

I am content to meet with representatives of the Motorcycle Union to hear about their issues.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the consultation document published on the Regulation of Gambling in Northern Ireland in December 2019.

(AQW 347/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department for Communities launched a consultation - "Regulation of Gambling in Northern Ireland" - on 16 December 2019, this will run until 21 February 2020. My officials prepared this consultation without Ministerial input and it does not therefore include any policy proposals.

The purpose of the current consultation is to seek views on the appropriateness of the law and to identify areas of gambling activity which should be included in any future legislation.

My officials will analyse the responses received and I hope to announce the way forward by the summer.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities what steps are being taken to advance the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations, published for public consultation in 2017.

(AQW 349/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Analysis of stakeholder feedback regarding the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations has been completed by officials. The Housing Executive has prepared preliminary implementation plans. I look forward to considering the Review and possible next steps in the coming weeks.

Department of Education

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education in relation to the Strule Education Campus in Omagh, to detail the expected (i) start date; and (ii) completion date.

(AQW 194/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Strule Programme is a pioneering project and a massive capital investment in the delivery of education in the region. It is a longstanding Executive priority.

The Department continues to work closely with the six school principals and their teams to build on the culture of sharing in Omagh through a wide range of shared education initiatives. These innovative programmes are being developed and led by the schools themselves to ensure today's students have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of sharing, and play an important role in shaping future education delivery both locally and regionally.

The next stage of construction has been delayed due to tendering issues. The Department has completed a fundamental review of the construction programme and I will be giving consideration to the issues raised.

In light of this delay the go live date has been revised. Provisional opening of the Campus is planned for September 2024 at the earliest. This is dependent on works commencing on site by May 2021 at the latest.

In the meantime all other work on the Programme, including construction and non-construction projects, is continuing uninterrupted. The site preparation works are substantially complete and Strathroy Link Road was completed in November 2019.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) development proposals submitted by (a) primary; and (b) post-primary schools in East Londonderry that have not received a decision on their proposal; and (ii) the length of time each school has waited for a decision since their submission.

(AQW 217/17-22)

Mr Weir: There is one primary school in the East Londonderry constituency awaiting a decision on a Development Proposal (DP) and no post primary schools.

DP 588 for the proposed closure of Ballyhackett Primary School was received on 3 September 2019. No decision has been made as the school has indicated it intends to bring forward a DP proposing its transformation to Controlled Integrated Status. The Department has agreed to await the submission of the Transformation proposal in order to make a fully informed decision on the future of this school.

Future of Schools in West Tyrone

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the future of each (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary school in West Tyrone.

(AQW 221/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority's Annual Action Plan for Primary, Post-Primary and Special Schools April 2019-March 2021 (the Action Plan) sets out the work programme of the planning and managing authorities to address specific issues at local level.

There are currently 11 primary schools in West Tyrone named in the Action Plan, however, Development Proposals for Gillygooley Primary School (PS), Dunmullan PS and St Eugene's PS, Lislap a34erre also being taken forward and are currently at pre-publication consultation stage.

The 11 primary schools are named as follows:

Primary Schools	Action
Edwards Primary School	Managing authority to consult on increase in admissions and enrolment numbers by January 2020
Queen Elizabeth II Primary School	Managing authorities to consult on options for future provision at Dromore PS and Queen Elizabeth II PS by June 2020
Dromore Primary School	Managing authorities to consult on options for future provision at Dromore PS and Queen Elizabeth II PS by June 2020
Tummery Primary School	Managing authority to consult on options for future provision at Drumlish PS, Tummery PS and St Dympna's PS by June 2020
Drumduff Primary School	Managing authority to consult on options for future provision at Drumduff PS by March 2020
St Brigid's Primary School	Managing authority to consult on options for future provision of St Brigid's PS and St Peter's PS by March 2020

Primary Schools	Action
Drumlish Primary School	Managing authority to consult on options for future provision at Drumlish PS, Tummery PS and St Dympna's PS by June 2020
St Eugene's Primary School	Managing authority to consult on options for future provision of St Eugene's PS by March 2020
St Peter's Primary School	Managing authority to consult on options for future provision of St Brigid's PS and St Peter's PS by March 2020
St Dympna's Primary School	Managing authority to consult on options for future provision at Drumlish PS, Tummery PS and St Dympna's PS by June 2020
Omagh Integrated Primary School	Board of Governors to consult on options for the future pre-school provision at Omagh IPS by January 2021

There are no post-primary schools in West Tyrone named in the Action Plan.

The Action Plan can be accessed via the following weblink:-

<https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/Annual%20Action%20Plan%202019-21.pdf>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans for the former Strabane Grammar School site on the Liskey Road, Strabane, following the recent arson attack and vandalism.
(AQW 224/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not own or have responsibility for the site you have enquired about, as it remains under the ownership of the Education Authority (EA).

I can, however, confirm that the EA is currently considering the future need for the site once it is fully vacated by Strabane Academy. Should there be no future need for the Strabane Grammar School site and buildings the EA will formally dispose of this asset in line with Land and Property Services' Central Advisory Unit's publication entitled "Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property in Northern Ireland"

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has for a new build youth centre in Strabane.
(AQW 225/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department has no current plans for a new build youth centre in Strabane.

The last call for voluntary youth capital projects issued in 2016. No applications were lodged by voluntary youth organisations in the Strabane area in response to this call.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) how; and (ii) when an external and independent root and branch review of Education will be established.
(AQW 230/17-22)

Mr Weir: I will give consideration to the design and delivery of the Independent Review of Education Provision as articulated in New Decade, New Approach. It would, thereafter, be my intention to bring forward proposals to the Executive on the scope of the review, the expected timescales, the potential costs and the approach for discussion and endorsement and to ensure that the appropriate resources and budget are made available to allow the Department of Education to commence the work.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans for a new build at Bangor Central Integrated Primary School.
(AQW 265/17-22)

Mr Weir: Bangor Central Integrated Primary School has been selected for a major capital investment project to improve or replace its accommodation. The project will cater for the school's current approved enrolment of 618 pupils.

A business case is currently being finalised by the Education Authority. I understand that EA will submit the business case imminently for consideration by the Department of Education. This will identify the best value for money option to be taken forward.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education, given that Carrickfergus Academy is split over the former Carrick College and Downshire Community School sites, when consideration will be given to locating the Academy on a single site.
(AQW 274/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials are currently undertaking preparatory work to identify and prioritise potential projects for a possible major capital announcement in the coming months and I can confirm that the Education Authority has submitted an application on behalf of Carrickfergus Academy as part of this process.

Given that this is a live and ultimately competitive process it would not be appropriate for me to comment on that process at this time.

The application will be scored in line with the published protocol as is the case for all schools that apply.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education whether he has plans to change his ministerial car to one which is powered by electricity or any other non-fossil fuel.

(AQW 283/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has owned the current Ministerial car for almost five years and it is due for replacement. I have asked officials to bring forward options which are appropriate for the anticipated mileage of the vehicle, balancing value for money against the need to encourage sustainability and lower emissions.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) whether he has considered the transformation development proposal for St. Mary's High School, Brollagh; and (ii) the current status of the proposal.

(AQW 285/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has completed its pre-publication consultation with other schools considered likely to be affected by the Development Proposal for the proposed Transformation of St Mary's High School, Brollagh to Controlled Integrated status. The pre-publication consultation ended on 19 December 2019.

The proposal will go to the EA's Education Committee for consideration prior to its publication, which will then be followed by a two-month statutory objection period. All views and opinions expressed to the Department during this period will be considered as part of my deliberations on a proposal and before I take a decision on it.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to outline how he plans to resolve the teacher's trade unions' industrial action.

(AQW 303/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education is not the employer of teachers. The Teachers' Negotiating Committee (TNC) is the recognised negotiating machinery for teachers' terms and conditions, represented on the trade union side by the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council, which includes the five main teachers' unions and on Management Side, by the main managing authorities, particularly the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, sectoral interests and the Department.

Work is already well progressed to resolve this issue. I am pleased that, following extensive negotiations, agreement in principle has been reached. However, a formal offer cannot be made yet to teachers' unions because of the requirement for Department of Finance approval and funding cover. A case for funding has already been made to the Department of Finance, which would cover initial funding as well as additional impact on baseline resources. I am urgently progressing this in order to resolve this industrial action.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to make mental health and wellbeing provisions mandatory within schools.

(AQW 310/17-22)

Mr Weir: The legal minimum content to be taught by schools in Northern Ireland is set out in The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (NI) 2007 as high level areas of learning. The mandatory Learning for Life and Work Curriculum at post-primary includes mental health and wellbeing. As a legal minimum, pupils are expected to have opportunities to understand the importance of recognising and managing factors that may influence emotional and mental health throughout life and to develop an understanding of how to maximise and sustain their own health and wellbeing.

My Department is also working collaboratively with the Department of Health, Public Health Agency and Education Authority to ensure that schools are supported to promote Mental Health and Wellbeing within their settings.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Education for an update on the extension at St Kevin's College, Lisnakea as part of the School Enhancement Programme.

(AQW 376/17-22)

Mr Weir: An Integrated Consultant Team (ICT) has recently been appointed to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP) project at St Kevin's College. The ICT will develop the design, appoint a Contractor for the works and supervise the project through to completion.

The initial meeting of the Project Board is due to take place on 24 January 2020. This meeting will allow the school to meet the ICT and agree the project governance arrangements.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Strule Education Campus in Omagh.

(AQW 386/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Strule Programme is a pioneering project and a massive capital investment in the delivery of education in the region. It is a longstanding Executive priority.

The Department continues to work closely with the six school principals and their teams to build on the culture of sharing in Omagh through a wide range of shared education initiatives. These innovative programmes are being developed and led by the schools themselves to ensure today's students have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of sharing, and play an important role in shaping future education delivery both locally and regionally.

The next stage of construction has been delayed due to tendering issues. The Department has completed a fundamental review of the construction programme and I will be giving consideration to the issues raised.

In light of this delay the go live date has been revised. Provisional opening of the Campus is planned for September 2024 at the earliest. This is dependent on works commencing on site by May 2021 at the latest.

In the meantime all other work on the Programme, including construction and non-construction projects, is continuing uninterrupted. The site preparation works are substantially complete and Strathroy Link Road was completed in November 2019.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education, following debate in the Assembly on 11 October 2016, what action was taken to (i) improve the monitoring and reporting of physical education hours accessed by primary school pupils; and (ii) issue a public consultation on the introduction of a statutory obligation on schools to facilitate an appropriate minimum amount of physical education hours per week for primary school pupils.

(AQW 391/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department monitors and reports on the provision of Physical Education (PE) in schools through the School Omnibus Survey. The results of the 2018 survey can be found at www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-omnibus-survey-2018. The Education and Training Inspectorate also monitors the provision of PE in schools as part of its ongoing schedule of inspections.

My Department continues to fund the Sports Programme in 2019/20, through which school leaders evaluate the impact of the programme on improving PE and sports provision within their school.

The Northern Ireland curriculum recognises the importance of providing schools with the flexibility to plan their teaching to meet the needs of their pupils. I have no plans, therefore, at present to consult on a statutory minimum amount of PE hours per week for primary school pupils.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Education to outline the future of all (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary schools in the Lagan Valley constituency.

(AQW 423/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority's Annual Action Plan for Primary, Post-Primary and Special Schools April 2019-March 2021 (the Action Plan) sets out the work programme of the planning and managing authorities to address specific issues at local level.

The Action Plan reflects the current position, sets out the key issues and lists all actions that will be taken in relation to developing area solutions and also proposals to address sustainability at specific schools, including any primary and post-primary schools in the Lagan Valley constituency which is mostly covered by the Lisburn and Castlereagh Local Government District planning area, with a small number of schools located within the Belfast; Newry, Mourne and Down; and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Local Government District planning areas.

The Action Plan can be accessed via the following link:

<https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/Annual%20Action%20Plan%202019-21.pdf>

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to outline what actions his Department intends to take following allegations in the broadcast media of malpractice within the Education Authority's Special Educational Needs department.

(AQW 436/17-22)

Mr Weir: Following allegations on a media programme in September 2019, the Chief Executive of the Education Authority (EA) commissioned an audit of practice across special educational needs services within the EA. This was a comprehensive audit of the current administrative practices associated with statutory assessment and statementing processes. The audit focussed on Information Governance; compliance with timeframes and unnecessary or undue delays.

The audit has now concluded and I am expecting a report from the EA shortly.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to outline the timescale for the full implementation of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act 2016.

(AQW 437/17-22)

Mr Weir: Following concerns raised by the teaching unions, the Department agreed to a temporary pause in the planned implementation of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (NI) 2016 ('the Act') to facilitate further meaningful dialogue.

While I am unable to confirm an exact date for implementation of the Act, I can assure you that the Department remains committed to bringing this Act into operation as soon as possible.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) what action he intends to take to resolve the ongoing industrial action by teachers; and (ii) a timeframe for when this will be resolved.

(AQW 440/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education is not the employer of teachers. The Teachers' Negotiating Committee is the recognised negotiating machinery for teachers' terms and conditions, represented on the trade union side by the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council, which includes the five main teachers' unions and on Management Side, by the main managing authorities, particularly the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, sectoral interests and the Department.

Work is already well progressed to resolve this issue. I am pleased that, following extensive negotiations, agreement in principle has been reached. However, a formal offer cannot be made yet to teachers' unions because of the requirement for Department of Finance approval and funding cover. A case for funding has already been made to the Department of Finance which covers initial funding as well as the additional impact on baseline resources. Allocation of funding is still under consideration and I am urgently progressing this in order to resolve this industrial action.

Department of Finance

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance how he intends to support town centres following the recent review of the non-domestic rating system.

(AQW 199/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): My Department hosted an Innovation Lab with the Departments for Infrastructure and Communities last July to consider 'How can we make town and city centres places where people want to live, work, visit and do business in?' This identified agreed questions for each Department to consider further. My Department has been considering two questions: 'How do we reform the tax system to ensure we have sufficient revenue to pay for public services and the tax burden is fair?' and 'How do we reduce the individual rates burden without decreasing the level of funding that rates provides?' These questions form a core part of the Business Rates Review that was launched in 2019. The public consultation closed only a matter of weeks ago, and I will use the findings to inform my own views on how to best tackle this important issue.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance, in light of Reval2020, what action his Department is taking to ensure businesses pay a fair rate.

(AQW 222/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department has carried out a revaluation to ensure businesses pay fair rates. The non-domestic rating system is based on the rental value of a property. Periodic revaluations of all properties ensures fairness by aligning rateable values with up to date rental values. The last revaluation was based on 2013 rental values and Reval 2020 is now based on 2018 rental values. Land & Property Services has used market evidence to adjust rateable values in line with market changes that have occurred over this 5 year period. If a revaluation was not carried out, many ratepayers would continue to pay at too high a level. The actual changes in rate liability, however, will not be known until the new Regional and District Rate poundages are set. I will also bring proposals on business rates to the Assembly in due course.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to quantify any efficiencies and savings anticipated in consequence of New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 238/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The department of Finance is working with other departments on a more detailed costing of the commitments in the New Decade, New Approach document. Efficiencies and savings will be identified as part of the overall process for agreeing departmental budgets.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance to outline (i) how; and (ii) when a fiscal council will be established, in order to assess and report on the sustainability of the Executive's finance and spending proposals.

(AQW 307/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Proposals for the implementation of the commitments and actions in the New Decade, New Approach Agreement will be brought forward by relevant Ministers in due course.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) discussions with the British Government in relation to the proposed financial package linked to New Decade, New Approach; and (ii) how much has been secured to date.

(AQW 339/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Discussions on the financial package are ongoing. Of the £2 billion proposed, half is future Barnett consequential which would be received regardless of New Decade, New Approach. Of the remaining £1 billion, some £240 million is funding previously committed under the Confidence and Supply Agreement. This leaves just £760 million of new funding over a number of years.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance to outline all opportunities to raise revenue arising before the end of the current mandate.

(AQW 379/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Opportunities for revenue raising will be examined by individual Ministers as part of the overall Budget process which will be considered by the Executive in due course.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance to outline any conditions imposed by Treasury regarding expenditure of additional financial support coming from the Confidence and Supply Agreement, including dates when monies must be used.

(AQW 381/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Confidence and Supply funding was ring-fenced for the following purposes:

Area	Total (£million)	Time Period
Infrastructure Development	400	2 years
Ultra-fast Broadband	150	2 years
Targeting Pockets of Severe Deprivation	100	5 years
Health and Education Pressures	100	2 years
Health Transformation	200	2 years
Mental Health	50	5 years

£760 million was allocated in the period 2017-18 to 2019-20. £240 million of the funding (£150 million for Broadband, £60 million for tackling severe deprivation and £30 million for Mental Health) has now been withdrawn.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance to outline (i) the future budget process; and (ii) the relevant timeframe.

(AQW 415/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A Budget must be in place before the start of the 2020-21 financial year. The specifics of the Budget process and timeframe will be considered by the Executive in the coming weeks.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Finance when the Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry report will be published.

(AQW 552/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Inquiry is an independent public Inquiry and there is no role for the Minister of Finance in publication of its report. It is the responsibility of the Chairman of the Inquiry to publish his Inquiry's report.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance when the draft budget for 2020/21 will be published; and whether the schedule to finalise the draft will enable publicly funded bodies to plan for the forthcoming financial year.

(AQW 570/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive must put in place a Budget for 2020-21 before the start of the financial year. Decisions on the Budget are a matter for the Executive, and I will bring forward proposals in due course, following engagement with Ministerial colleagues.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance if he has sought or been provided with a date for the likely publication of the Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry Report.

(AQW 617/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Inquiry is an independent public Inquiry. I am committed to ensuring that the Inquiry's report is free from ministerial interference or any perception of it and I have written to the Inquiry Chairman in this regard:

<https://www.rhiinquiry.org/sites/rhi/files/media-files/Letter-Minister-Conor-Murphy-to-Chairman-17Jan2020-Publication-Of-Report.pdf>

I have not sought or been provided with a date for publication of the RHI Inquiry report.

Department of Health

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of occasions that the North Down and Ards GP Out of Hours Service failed to have a full shift complement of qualified doctors on duty (i) based in the Newtownards office and; (ii) operating from those premises between 1 September 2019 and 31 December 2019.

(AQW 183/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Between 1 September 2019 and 31 December 2019 there were 45 occasions when the centre had reduced opening hours and medical cover was re-provided from the two centres in Lagan Valley and Downe Hospitals.

The breakdown of the planned number of doctors and actual number of doctors on duty for the period in question is shown in Table 1 overleaf. The table of figures refers to both on duty doctors and those operating from those premises.

Table 1: Planned and actual number of doctors on duty, North Down and Ards GP Out of Hours Service, September – December 2019

Month	Planned	Actual	Variance
Sep-2019	73	42	31
Oct-2019	60	29	31
Nov-2019	41	23	18
Dec-2019	86	61	25

Source: Health and Social Care Board

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to address (i) the current epidemic of suicide; and (ii) general mental health in communities.

(AQW 185/17-22)

Mr Swann: With regard to suicide, the Protect Life 2 Strategy was published on 10 September 2019 and sets out a clear action plan for addressing suicide. This includes new initiatives which have commenced such as the Multi Agency Triage Team, Regional Towards Zero Suicide Mental Health Collaborative Programme and Crisis De-escalation initiatives. Further funding is required to ensure full implementation of the Strategy.

A wide range of emotional health and wellbeing programmes are also included within Protect Life 2, including initiatives through art, culture, libraries and sport; workplaces; schools; colleges and universities.

Furthermore, the Public Health Agency's Small Grants Programme promotes mental and emotional health and wellbeing and reduces inequalities in communities.

Within communities, the GP is often the first point of call for mental health issues. Developments such as primary care multi-disciplinary teams will help provide better services at this point of first interaction, providing mental health practitioners based in GP practices.

To further strengthen and develop mental health services I intend to publish a Mental Health Action Plan within the next two months. This will set out a range of actions which will contribute to promoting mental health in communities.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to outline his Department's position on providing access to cannabis-based medicines.

(AQW 197/17-22)

Mr Swann: Specialist clinicians may decide to prescribe cannabis-based medicines taking into account the evidence, the potential risks and benefits of treatment, and individual circumstances.

Unfortunately, there has been limited evidence available for clinicians on the safety and efficacy of these medicines to support prescribing decisions. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has recently published a Clinical Guideline (NG144) which will support clinicians by providing guidance on the prescribing of cannabis-based medicines for nausea and vomiting, chronic pain, spasticity and severe treatment resistant epilepsy. My Department formally endorsed this guidance for implementation by Health and Social Care providers on 14 January 2020.

My Department has also endorsed the recent NICE technical appraisals TA614 (Cannabidiol with clobazam for treating seizures associated with Dravet syndrome) and TA615 (Cannabidiol with clobazam for treating seizures associated with Lennox-Gastaut syndrome) for implementation in Health and Social Care on 14 January 2020. This will ensure that patients in Northern Ireland are able to benefit from timely and equitable access to these new medicines for which there is an evidence base on efficacy and cost-effectiveness.

My officials are working with colleagues across the UK to address some of the barriers to patients accessing cannabis-based medicines on a Health Service prescription, where this is clinically appropriate.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many hospital outpatient appointments were missed in 2019.

(AQW 215/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data relating to outpatient activity, including the number of appointments patients did not attend (DNA), are published annually by financial year. The most recent publication was released in August 2019 and can be found at the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/hospital-statistics-outpatient-activity-statistics-201819>.

There were 126,393 appointments missed by patients in 2018/19.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) what steps will be taken to expand IVF provision to three funded cycles; and (ii) the timeframe when these will be available.

(AQW 233/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am pleased that the New Decade, New Approach Agreement committed to providing 3 funded IVF cycles for eligible women.

The Regional Fertility Centre however does not currently have sufficient capacity to meet the demand for treatment arising from offering 3 cycles of IVF to all eligible women, as there are not enough trained staff to carry out the procedures, nor is there enough space at the premises to facilitate a higher number of patients.

My officials are currently giving urgent consideration to how this important issue can be taken forward and as such I am unable to give a definitive implementation date at this stage.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health to detail the cost of (i) medical agency staff; and (ii) nursing agency staff broken down by each (i) Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) departmental arm's-length body for the last six months of 2019.

(AQW 236/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department monitors Health and Social Care Trusts' expenditure on agency staff on a quarterly basis across financial years, for a range of staff groups. The Department does not monitor agency spend for other arm's-length bodies. The figures for the final quarter of 2019 are not yet available.

Expenditure on (i) medical and dental agency staff; and (ii) nursing and midwifery agency staff by Health and Social Care Trust, from 1st April 2019 to 30th September 2019 (the latest information available for a six-month period), is given below:

	Belfast HSC Trust	Northern HSC Trust	Northern Ireland Ambulance Service HSC Trust	South Eastern HSC Trust	Southern HSC Trust	Western HSC Trust	Total
Medical & Dental	11,605,818	9,469,152	0	5,871,901	8,876,864	11,467,118	47,290,853
Nursing & Midwifery	17,097,851	6,716,314	0	2,735,616	8,075,273	4,524,133	39,149,187

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to develop a new (i) fire station; and (ii) ambulance station to serve the Limavady urban and rural districts.

(AQW 254/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently no plans to develop a new fire station or ambulance station in the Limavady urban and rural districts although both NIFRS and NIAS are currently reviewing their service configurations, with a view to future consultations on the issue.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many nursing positions are currently vacant.

(AQW 268/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of nursing and medical vacancies actively being recruited to is published on a quarterly basis and can be found at the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/staff-vacancies>.

At 30 September 2019, there were 2,269 registered nurse vacancies and 214 medical vacancies actively being recruited to.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many doctor positions are currently vacant in hospitals in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 269/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of nursing and medical vacancies actively being recruited to is published on a quarterly basis and can be found at the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/staff-vacancies>.

At 30 September 2019, there were 2,269 registered nurse vacancies and 214 medical vacancies actively being recruited to.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Health for an update on the proposed health care centre in Lisnakea, Co Fermanagh.
(AQW 292/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Western Health and Social Care Trust submitted a revised business case to my Department in December 2019. Following Departmental review, the Trust is addressing a number of further issues and will then to submit a further revised business case. The business case will also require Department of Finance approval.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health, further to his statement to the Assembly on 14 January 2020, (i) which bands of Health and Social Care staff will receive pay parity with England; (ii) whether domestic and support services will receive an uplift; (iii) when staff will receive payment and; (iv) whether pay parity will be backdated to the beginning of financial year 2019/20.

(AQW 297/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Pay parity with England will apply to all Bands.
- (ii) This will include those employed within the HSC in domestic and support services.
- (iii) The award will be implemented as soon as is possible. (iv)The award is effective from 1 April 2019.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the future of primary care services in Strabane.
(AQW 299/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department has been working to develop a new model for primary care across Northern Ireland based on multi-disciplinary teams working together to keep people well. As part of this, we have made significant investments in GP practices in Strabane; with the recruitment of a range of multi-disciplinary team professionals including physiotherapists, mental health workers and social workers to improve primary care delivery for service users. Work is also ongoing to secure enhancements to practice premises in Strabane to support the new model.

Further, the creation of a hub in Strabane as part of the hub and spoke model for primary care remains under active consideration subject to business case assessment and funding availability.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail what changes have been made to service provision at (i) Strabane; and (ii) Omagh fire stations.
(AQW 302/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) There have been no changes to service provision at Strabane.
- (ii) Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service introduced an Interim Service Delivery Model (SDM) on 12 August 2019. This SDM reduced wholtime crewing levels from 5 to 3 Firefighters at Omagh Station. The SDM has not had an impact on the On-Call service provision at Omagh Station.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to replace Bangor Health Centre with a new health centre.
(AQW 336/17-22)

Mr Swann: Plans for a new Primary and Community Care Centre in Bangor are included in the Primary Care Infrastructure Draft Strategic Implementation Plan.

The Draft Implementation Plan includes provision for a new health centre to serve the population of the North Down and Newtownards area. This will be considered alongside other capital investment priorities and will be dependent on future budget availability, value for money and affordability.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health when nurses will receive pay parity.
(AQW 338/17-22)

Mr Swann: As outlined in my statement to the Assembly on the 14th January, pay parity with England can now be restored for our nurses and other health and social care staff with effect from 1st April 2019. The Business Services Organisation (BSO) is taking steps to implement the award as soon as possible.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to outline the actions his Department are taking to increase urgent care provision in Strabane.
(AQW 382/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am very aware of the pressures faced by the GP OOHs service across NI due to demand and difficulties filling GP shifts. The provision of the service is a priority, and we continue to work closely with the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and the OOHs providers to address the current challenges.

Service improvements continue to be introduced including adjusting the skill mix of clinicians, increasing levels of nurse triage provision, employing more nurse practitioners and increasing flexibility in shift times.

Western Urgent Care routinely reviews its operating model in order to meet the health needs of the local community and effectively manages its capacity. The local population are encouraged to utilise the service appropriately to meet urgent health care needs which cannot wait to be seen by their registered practice when it reopens.

There are approximately 108,000 patient contacts per annum and regular patient surveys carried out by WUC indicate high levels of patient satisfaction.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the future of the former Omagh Hospital site.
(AQW 384/17-22)

Mr Swann: The former Omagh Hospital site has been declared surplus by the Western HSC Trust and following a public sector trawl was placed on the open market in June 2019. The property has been agreed for sale, subject to contract, and it is anticipated that the sale will complete in 2020/21.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health to detail the cost of (i) medical agency staff; (ii) nursing agency staff, broken down by each (a) Health and Social Care Trust; and (b) departmental arm's-length body in the (i) 2014/15; (ii) 2015/16; (iii) 2016/17; (iv) 2017/18; and (v) 2018/19 financial years.
(AQW 397/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department monitors Health and Social Care Trusts' expenditure on agency staff on a quarterly basis for specific staffing categories, across financial years. The Department does not monitor agency spend for other arm's-length bodies. Expenditure on (i) medical and dental agency staff; and (ii) nursing and midwifery agency staff, by Health and Social Care Trust, for the last five financial years, is given below;

Medical and Dental Agency Expenditure

TRUST	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
BHSCT	£11,830,000	£15,101,576	£18,479,870	£18,789,536	£22,430,062
NHSCT	£8,363,454	£7,802,300	£12,321,220	£16,404,945	£17,503,264
SEHSCT	£3,999,638	£4,433,459	£8,707,389	£8,920,233	£10,636,954
SHSCT	£3,743,778	£5,693,849	£11,907,956	£12,785,008	£15,511,952
WHSCT	£10,569,863	£12,954,079	£17,238,467	£16,554,429	£20,656,870
NIAS	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0
Total Spend	£38,506,733	£45,985,263	£68,654,902	£73,454,151	£86,739,102

Nursing and Midwifery Agency Expenditure

TRUST	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
BHSCT	£5,623,000	£6,668,756	£9,467,147	£12,529,388	£19,231,230
NHSCT	£1,595,350	£3,297,233	£6,810,643	£9,153,695	£11,028,899
SEHSCT	£1,883,926	£2,047,749	£1,877,793	£3,144,583	£3,904,493
SHSCT	£192,407	£1,399,191	£2,423,601	£3,758,100	£10,843,948
WHSCT	£2,799,372	£2,391,544	£2,965,126	£3,571,683	£7,062,151
NIAS	£0	£0	£0	£5,440	£1,020
Total Spend	£12,094,055	£15,804,473	£23,544,310	£32,162,889	£52,071,741

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health to outline when he will publish the Nursing and Midwifery Review Report.
(AQW 430/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have committed to publishing the report as soon as possible following the opportunity to meet with the Chair of the task group Sir Richard Barnett, and fully consider the recommendations.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health how many of the 900 nursing and midwifery undergraduate places per year, detailed in New Decade, New Approach, will be allocated to Magee, broken down by year.
(AQW 540/17-22)

Mr Swann: No decisions have yet been taken on the allocation of the 900 additional nursing and midwifery undergraduate places over the next three years detailed in New Decade, New Approach. These decisions are anticipated to be made by March 2020.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure what is the interpretation and purpose of the term 'tapping' within Northern Ireland Water.

(AQW 201/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): NI Water has advised me that it uses the term "tapping" or "stop tap" to describe the connection of the communications/supply pipe to NI Water's water main. This communication/supply pipe runs from the NI Water main to the boundary of the customer's property.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to introduce residents only on-street parking schemes in Limavady.

(AQW 210/17-22)

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 underway. I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme inform wider policy on implementing residents' parking schemes.

I understand that requests for residents' parking in two areas of Limavady have already been received by my Department. I can assure the Member that my officials are assessing these in the context of developing a new approach to residents' parking schemes that incorporates the learning from the first scheme.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will replace the loading bays on Main Street, Bangor with additional parking spaces.

(AQW 211/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current waiting restrictions on Main Street, Bangor including the two loading bays, represent the most appropriate arrangement for meeting the needs of users of this busy town centre street. Removal of the loading bays would create difficulties with servicing the various business premises on Main Street and this in turn could lead to increasing traffic congestion in the area, something that I would be keen to avoid.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the current pricing disparities for NI Railways customers travelling from Derry to Dublin compared to those travelling from Coleraine to Dublin.

(AQW 235/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Discounted travel fares to Dublin from all NIR stations can be availed of from using the Web Saver journey ticket. However I recognise that currently there is an issue of collecting these types of tickets from Derry/Londonderry compared to Coleraine. This arose due to the fact that Coleraine is a fully staffed station whilst Derry/Londonderry was not.

I am happy to say that due to the improved opening hours and additional staff resources now in place at the new North West Multimodal Transport Hub, the facility for passengers to collect these tickets will be made available from early February 2020.

Planning Oversight and Scrutiny

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure following the transfer of planning functions as part of Local Government Reform in April 2015, to outline her Department's oversight and scrutiny roles in respect of Local Authorities.

(AQW 259/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's statutory role in relation to local authorities in the 2-tier planning system is set out primarily in the Planning Act (NI) 2011. This includes powers in relation to scrutiny of council-prepared local development plans; powers to 'call-in' planning applications; and reserve enforcement powers, which are intended to be used in exceptional circumstances. Part 10 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 also allows my Department to conduct an assessment of a council's performance or decision making.

My Department also sets performance indicators and standards for councils through the Local Government (Performance Indicators and Standards) Order (NI) 2015 for major and local planning applications and enforcement, which are measured and reported upon on a quarterly and annual basis. In addition, the first Northern Ireland Planning Monitoring Framework which includes a number of new non-statutory indicators was also published in September 2019.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many Penalty Charge Notices for parking have been issued in (i) Bangor; (ii) Donaghadee; and (iii) Holywood, in the last three years.

(AQW 275/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of Penalty Charge Notices issued for parking in Bangor, Holywood and Donaghadee in the last 3 years is:

Bangor	12,869
Holywood	5,161
Donaghadee	48

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure what support will be made available for victims of the recent flooding in Carrickfergus as a result of Storm Brendan.

(AQW 350/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that high overtopping waves during storm Brendan led to the internal flooding of some properties in Rhanbuoy Park in Carrickfergus.

The Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme is available to provide support to victims of flooding. Some of the residents in the area had already been assisted by this Grant Scheme and deployed flood protection measures to protect their property. My officials are writing to all those affected by the recent flooding to provide information on eligibility for the scheme and how to apply. I also understand that local government colleagues are working closely with affected households to determine if they are able to avail of the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance operated by the Department for Communities which provides a one off payment of £1,000 to make homes fit to live in again as quickly as possible.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the provision of e-car public charging points, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 393/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC rapid charge point in Northern Ireland. The ecar public charge point network in Northern Ireland is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB).

The ESB public charge point map below shows the locations of all the charge points on their network in Northern Ireland which can be accessed from the link below. However, it is not broken down by constituency. You may wish to contact ESB at ecars@esb.ie for assistance.

<https://www.ecarni.com/charge-point-map?54.6078680,-5.9264370,7z>

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the public inquiry that is due to take place next month, to outline the latest developments regarding the commencement of the A5 Western Transport Corridor.

(AQW 534/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Subject to the satisfactory and successful conclusion of all statutory procedures and all necessary environmental assessments, I am hopeful that first phase of this scheme, from New Buildings to north of Strabane (Phase 1A) could commence in late 2020 / early 2021 with completion in 2023.

Department of Justice

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the current level of criminal activities in East Antrim.

(AQW 186/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I have already met with the Chief Constable and over the course of the next few weeks I will be receiving regular and detailed security briefings.

However, the assessment of criminal activities is an operational matter and therefore should fall to 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 Policing Board. You may therefore wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice how her Department will progress its Sentencing Review, including whether sentencing for drink-driving offences will be changed.

(AQW 195/17-22)

Mrs Long: A public consultation entitled "Sentencing Review Northern Ireland" was launched by my Department on 28 October 2019. The consultation period was extended to take account of the General Election and the Christmas break and will

close on 3 February 2020. My officials are currently engaged in a series of events designed to encourage and facilitate input from the public on this important consultation. Responses to the consultation will inform any recommendations for change.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice what actions she intends to take to ensure the rebuild of HMP Magilligan proceeds as soon as possible.

(AQW 207/17-22)

Mrs Long: Work is ongoing on the development of a revised Outline Business Case (OBC) for the Redevelopment of Magilligan Prison. The revised OBC will reflect alternative delivery models which were considered as part of the Estates 2020 discussion document which was launched in December 2018.

The delivery of the Magilligan Redevelopment Project is dependent on the provision of capital funding which will be considered as part of wider Executive budget discussions.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether she will take immediate action to sign off the Independent Pay Review Body recommendation of a 2.5% pay increase for Police Service of Northern Ireland officers backdated to June 2019.

(AQW 291/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department is currently working to conclude the 2019/20 pay award for PSNI officers as soon as possible. The award was due in September 2019 and was progressed as soon as the Northern Ireland public sector pay policy was published.

Details of the award will be notified to policing stakeholders when the process has concluded.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 31 January 2020

Written Answers

The Executive Office

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if arrangements to strengthen the ability of parties in Opposition to hold the Executive to account, as agreed in the New Decade, New Approach, requires legislation; and when the relevant policy and/or legislation will be introduced to uphold this commitment.
(AQW 189/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Any arrangements, including amendment of the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, are in the first instance a matter for consideration by the Assembly.

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) any discussions with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland regarding the enactment of legislation to fulfil the reforms agreed in New Decade, New Approach in relation to the Petition of Concern; and (ii) when these reforms are expected to take effect.
(AQW 191/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Reform of the operation of the Petition of Concern and the need for any enactment of legislation for this purpose are in the first instance a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) their approach in creating an Executive work programme; (ii) whether it will include specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely aims and objectives for each Department; and (iii) whether they intend to publish timeframes alongside the aims and objectives.
(AQW 192/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Executive Office is currently preparing information on matters which require early referral to the Executive Committee. In addition, we intend to convene a special meeting of the Executive Committee in the near future to discuss its priorities and the arrangements through which the Programme for Government and the commitments in the New Decade New Approach Agreement might most effectively be delivered.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what costings have been carried out in respect of the new bodies, appointments and arrangements anticipated in 'New Decade, New Approach', in relation to (i) language measures; and (ii) all other innovations.
(AQW 202/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: All Ministers are making an assessment of the estimated costs of implementing the commitments in the New Decade New Approach Agreement. These will be refined as work progresses.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to quantify any (i) efficiencies; and (ii) savings anticipated in consequence of the 'New Decade, New Approach' deal.
(AQW 204/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Efficiencies and savings, where these arise, will be identified as part of the business case process for individual projects.

Mr Frew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) what measures are in place; and (ii) what work has been implemented to tackle loneliness.
(AQW 243/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Executive Office does not currently undertake any direct activity in relation to tackling loneliness. Responsibility for the Active Ageing Strategy, which identified this issue as significant for older people was transferred to the Department for Communities as part of the reorganisation of departments in 2016.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) when the review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the Statement of Entitlement for an Official Opposition will begin; (ii) who will appoint the independent person to conduct such a review; (iii) which Department will the review be submitted to; (iv) if it will be simultaneously released to all Members of the Assembly; and (v) whether the Ministers are committed to implementing the recommendations in full.

(AQW 288/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: We consider that the review of the Statement of Entitlements for an Official Opposition, including its timescale, conduct and reporting arrangements are matters for the Assembly to take forward and implement.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Irish language and Ulster Scots commissioners will be (i) selected through open competition run by the Civil Service to be appointed by the First and Deputy First Minister; or (ii) selected without open competition by the First and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 289/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: An agreement delivery programme is being developed by the Head of the Civil Service for consideration by the Executive Committee shortly.

The Commissioners will be selected through an open competition run by the Civil Service for appointment by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the new Veterans Commissioner will be (i) selected through advertised open competition run by the Civil Service; or (ii) appointed autonomously by the First and deputy First Minister without open competition.

(AQW 290/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The "New Decade, New Approach" deal specifies commitments contained in Annex A relating to the appointment of a Veterans Commissioner, which will be incorporated into law at Westminster by the Government. The method of the appointment will therefore be for them to consider.

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their plans to establish a 'dedicated sub-committee which will consider the findings of the RHI inquiry and propose further reforms' as agreed in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 293/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The process for establishing the sub-committee will be considered and agreed in due course.

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) whether the Party Leaders' Forum, as agreed in New Decade, New Approach, will include party leaders and independents not currently represented in the Executive; and (ii) the reasoning behind their decision.

(AQW 296/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: New Decade, New Approach states that the Party Leaders Forum will be attended by the leaders, or their 'permanent' nominated representative, of the political parties in the Executive. The membership reflects its role in supporting the Executive, as also stated, by providing a safe space for party leaders to discuss ongoing issues and provide early warning of any issues which might cause future political tension and disagreements.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) all Irish language groups and organisations within that sector that are recognised and supported by the Department; and (ii) how much funding has been provided to each such group/organisation, either directly by the Department or through arm's-length bodies, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 319/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Executive Office and Community Relations Council (i) have supported 8 Irish Language groups to deliver good relations projects in the last 5 funding years. (ii) A breakdown of funding is provided below.

Group	Funder	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Total
Conradh na Gaeilge (West Belfast)	TEO (Central Good Relations Fund)	£24,993.64	£30,000.00	£49,794.00	-	-	£104,787.64
Iarchimi Ard Mhacha Theas	Community Relations Council	£1,000.00	-	-	-	-	£1,000.00

Group	Funder	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Total
TURAS (East Belfast Mission)	Community Relations Council	£890.00	£30,492.00	£41,620.00	£41,841.00	£52,253.00	£167,096.00
An Droichead	Community Relations Council	-	-	£2,000.00	-	-	£2,000.00
An Gaelaras	Community Relations Council	£32,402.00	£27,536.00	£27,536.00	£30,015.00	£28,208.00	£145,697.00
Aisling Ghéar Theatre Co	Community Relations Council	-	-	-	-	£1,300.00	£1,300.00
Ionad na Fuisseoige	TEO (Urban Villages Initiative)	-	£4,995.00	£12,000.00	£8,656.00	£8,856.00	£34,507.00
TURAS and Ionad na Fuisseoige	TEO (Urban Villages Initiative)	-	-	-	£15,925.00	£25,000.00	£40,925.00
	Total	£59,285.64	£93,023.00	£132,950.00	£96,437.00	£115,617.00	£497,312.64

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they plan to support measures to reduce Corporation Tax. (AQW 359/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: My immediate focus is to ensure that we can fund basic public services which are clearly under significant pressure. Consequently, the devolution of Corporation Tax is not something that I am actively pursuing at this time.

Mr Wells asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have plans to change their ministerial cars to ones which are powered by electricity or any other non-fossil fuel. (AQW 366/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: There are no immediate plans to replace the ministerial cars within The Executive Office. When there is a requirement to change the cars, all options will be considered, including the use of cars powered by electricity or any other non-fossil fuel.

Mr Catney asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what has been spent on the Maze Long Kesh site in each of the last three years. (AQW 425/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Annual Report and Accounts of the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation for the years 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 are available in the Assembly Library, and detail expenditure on the site for those years. The documents are also published online at: <http://mazelongkesh.com/publications>

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what are the consultation arrangements in respect of the language proposals in New Decade, New Approach. (AQW 618/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Consideration is currently being given to the arrangements to bring forward the language proposals in the Agreement.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) how; and (ii) when an independent environmental protection agency will be established. (AQW 227/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Environmental governance is much wider than the degree of independence of an agency. It is about making appropriate decisions on the environmental outcomes we are seeking to achieve and the effective and efficient deployment of limited resources to achieve those outcomes.

Indeed, a November 2017 report on a review of environmental governance jointly commissioned by a number of NGOs stated that forming an independent environment agency without pinpointing what all the problems are would probably mean that any reforms might not operationally have much impact (and could potentially make things worse).

Any decisions on fundamental structural change of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is of course a matter for the Executive as a whole but a robust economic appraisal of the costs and benefits of an independent agency will be necessary to properly inform those decisions.

I am separately considering the options for the establishment of an independent environmental oversight body for Northern Ireland to replace the role currently undertaken by the European Commission. In the absence of a sitting Assembly, DAERA officials worked with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to extend provisions in the UK Government's Environment Bill relating to the establishment of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) to Northern Ireland. These provisions were included to keep options opened for Ministers. The proposed functions of the OEP will be to provide independent scrutiny of, and advice on, environmental law and policy; investigate environmental complaints from members of the public; and, where necessary, take enforcement action against public authorities for failure to comply with environmental law.

The extension of the OEP to Northern Ireland is one option and any decision to implement the relevant provisions in the Environment Bill will be a matter for Northern Ireland Ministers and the Assembly.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what consideration his Department will give to reduce or eradicate the use of single-use plastic bags in government buildings.

(AQW 231/17-22)

Mr Poots: Neither my Department nor contracts we use through the Central Purchasing Directorate of the Department of Finance involve the purchase or supply of single-use plastic bags for government buildings.

The New Decade New Approach sets out the possible outline of a future Programme for Government which includes creating a plan to eliminate plastic pollution. My Department has already begun work on this area and is partnering with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and Sustainable NI on a Tackling Plastic project to influence public behaviour on single-use plastics and work with schools, businesses, local Councils and the public sector to provide advice on how to reduce or eliminate single-use plastic.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what plans there are to replace the footbridge in Muff Glen Forest which was destroyed during the severe flooding in 2017.

(AQW 232/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am advised that the extreme flooding event in the North-West in 2017, which washed away the footbridge, also caused extensive undercutting of the river banks on both sides where the bridge was located. Consequently, a direct replacement is unlikely to be a practical solution.

Forest Service is seeking to develop, through a joint working partnership with Derry City and Strabane District Council, an overall proposal for a sustainable recreational product at Muff Glen forest which would include consideration of a replacement footbridge.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) what measures are in place; and (ii) what work has been implemented to tackle loneliness.

(AQW 242/17-22)

Mr Poots: The DAERA Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Programme currently supports a range of initiatives which contribute to tackling rural loneliness issues.

Officials are currently leading the development of a draft Rural Policy Framework which includes a strategic goal 'to reduce loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas'.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what impact the ammonia/nitrogen crisis is having on the public's health.

(AQW 257/17-22)

Mr Poots: As well as having impacts on the environment, ammonia emissions can result in human health impacts. This is because ammonia in the atmosphere can combine with other air pollutants, chiefly from combustion sources, to form fine particulate matter. Particulate matter can have significant health effects including aggravation of asthma, respiratory symptoms and mortality from cardiovascular and respiratory diseases and from lung cancer. Susceptible groups with pre-existing lung or heart disease, as well as elderly people and children, are particularly vulnerable.

Northern Ireland figures on the contribution of ammonia to fine particulate matter levels are not available and early consideration is being given to understanding this better.

Public health is an important and cross cutting issue and is rightly considered in the granting of some environmental permits through consultation with the public health agency. My officials are working to develop policies and strategies such as a draft Clean Air Strategy and a strategic approach to ammonia reduction, which will both help protect the environment and improve public health.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of whether the existing policy for regulating emissions of ammonia/nitrogen is responsible for current levels exceeding thresholds at which the environment is harmed.

(AQW 258/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department's current operational protocol on the assessment of impacts of ammonia/nitrogen emissions on sensitive habitats, as required under extant environmental legislation, has been in place since 2012. I am aware that since a recorded dip in ammonia emissions in 2010, emission levels have been increasing, largely due to increases in livestock numbers and limited uptake of ammonia abatement technologies.

The Department has been working hard to better understand and address the issue of increasing ammonia levels, including through engagement with key stakeholders. As part of this work, it is reviewing the current operational protocol. I am familiarising myself with the details of this complex issue and will ensure that work continues. It is in everyone's interest to address environmental concerns while allowing sustainable agricultural development.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many Sites of Special Scientific Interest were designated during (i) 2017; (ii) 2018; and (iii) 2019.

(AQW 280/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department designated 5 Areas of Special Scientific Interest in 2017 and 2 in 2018. There were no designations in 2019.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has plans to change his ministerial car to one which is powered by electricity or any other non-fossil fuel.

(AQW 284/17-22)

Mr Poots: The DAERA departmental (ministerial) car is currently being considered for replacement. A hybrid vehicle is being included in that consideration, given the geographically dispersed nature of DAERA's remit and the range of journeys involved.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline plans for bringing forward climate legislation in relation to New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 308/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have not yet considered plans to bring forward climate change legislation or other approaches outlined in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

It is important that NI contributes equitably to the UK net zero target. I will write to the Committee on Climate Change to advise on what would be our contribution to the UK's net zero emissions target. On receipt of their recommendation I will bring their findings to the NI Executive to agree a way forward.

It will require the support of the NI Executive to introduce any new cross cutting approaches on climate change.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the steps his Department has taken to tackle Bovine Tuberculosis (TB), particularly in dairy farms.

(AQW 355/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) programme requires all cattle herds to be subject to annual tuberculin skin testing, by approved veterinary surgeons, in compliance with Council Directive 64/432/EEC (as amended).

Testing is undertaken at DAERA's expense and any bovine with a positive reaction to the skin test is removed, along with other suspect bovines, and compensation paid to the herd owner at 100% of the removed animal's value.

All cattle sent to slaughter for human consumption are inspected for signs of bTB and all suspect tuberculous lesions in carcasses at routine slaughter must be notified to DAERA.

The cost of the bTB programme in 2018/19 was £40.18 million, with £23.6 million of this amount paid in compensation.

In early 2018, the Department introduced a number of additional bTB control measures, including an increased application of severe interpretation of the bTB skin test. This was in response to rising disease levels. These peaked in November 2017 and since then, herd and animal incidence levels have fallen by around 18%.

At the end of November 2019, the herd incidence was 7.98% and the animal incidence was 0.755%. However, I am conscious that bTB rates can be higher in dairy farms and reducing the disease in housed environments is challenging.

Among the measures that are particularly relevant in this context, the Tuberculosis Control Order (Northern Ireland) 1999 (as amended) requires the isolation of reactor and inconclusive animals from the rest of the herd (prior to removal). The legislation also prohibits the feeding of unsterilised milk from reactor animals to bovine or non-bovine animals (particularly dairy calves).

Public health advice is given to dairy farmers regarding the potential for spread of bTB through the consumption of unpasteurised milk.

Veterinary advice is also given to each farmer affected by a breakdown regarding biosecurity, including measures that can be taken to minimise contact between wildlife and housed cattle.

Reducing and ultimately eradicating bTB is a key priority and I recognise the work that has taken place to develop a bTB Eradication Strategy for Northern Ireland. I will be looking urgently at how best these Strategy recommendations might be implemented, for the benefit of everyone in our farming community.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in the face of the climate change emergency, to outline what actions or policies his Department will (i) take; or (ii) adopt, (a) immediately; (b) in the short term; and (c) in the longer term to help reduce carbon emissions.

(AQW 361/17-22)

Mr Poots: Climate change is a global challenge which needs to be addressed through comprehensive and effective global action. It requires action across all society to help reduce carbon emissions.

Cross departmental discussions and action on climate change is coordinated through the 'Future Generations Group'. The group consists of representatives from all NI Departments.

My Department sought advice from the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) on how Northern Ireland could reduce greenhouse gas emissions between now and 2030. In response the CCC published its "Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland" report". The report sets out the CCC's recommendations on possible actions or policies that NI can take to reduce our emissions. These recommendations are currently being considered by all NI Government Departments.

My Department has set up a 'Task and Finish' group to consider how we can reduce emissions from sectors for which we have key responsibility for. We will identify a suite of mitigation actions to be taken or adopted in the immediate, short and longer term that will help reduce carbon emissions.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his plans for the establishment of an environmental protection agency.

(AQW 367/17-22)

Mr Poots: Environmental governance is much wider than the degree of independence of an agency. It is about making appropriate decisions on the environmental outcomes we are seeking to achieve and the effective and efficient deployment of limited resources to achieve those outcomes.

Indeed, a November 2017 report on a review of environmental governance jointly commissioned by a number of NGOs stated that forming an independent environment agency without pinpointing what all the problems are would probably mean that any reforms might not operationally have much impact (and could potentially make things worse).

Any decisions on fundamental structural change of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is of course a matter for the Executive as a whole but a robust economic appraisal of the costs and benefits of an independent agency will be necessary to properly inform those decisions.

I am separately considering the options for the establishment of an independent environmental oversight body for Northern Ireland to replace the role currently undertaken by the European Commission. In the absence of a sitting Assembly, DAERA officials worked with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to extend provisions in the UK Government's Environment Bill relating to the establishment of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) to Northern Ireland. These provisions were included to keep options open for Ministers. The proposed functions of the OEP will be to provide independent scrutiny of, and advice on, environmental law and policy; investigate environmental complaints from members of the public; and, where necessary, take enforcement action against public authorities for failure to comply with environmental law.

The extension of the OEP to Northern Ireland is one option and any decision to implement the relevant provisions in the Environment Bill will be a matter for Northern Ireland Ministers and the Assembly.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of compliance with the regulations which forbid the use of metal cages for egg production.

(AQW 467/17-22)

Mr Poots: There are no regulations that forbid the use of metal cages for egg production. However, the use of unenriched cages (known as 'battery' cages) has been prohibited since 2012 under Council Directive 99/74. All 34 egg production units in Northern Ireland comply with the enriched cage requirements in the Directive.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what percentage of eggs produced originate from (i) free range; and (ii) caged hens.

(AQW 468/17-22)

Mr Poots: The volume of egg production within Northern Ireland is collated via a biannual DAERA survey of Egg Packers.

Using information available from the most recent published survey summary (December 2019), the percentages of the quantity of eggs produced by Northern Ireland farms using Free Range and Cage production systems is as follows: Free Range 66%; Cage 29%.

Barn and Organic eggs make up the remaining 5% of production.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what invest to save opportunities exist within her Department.

(AQW 485/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am currently considering a range of investment proposals as part of the Budget 2020-21 exercise. This work is ongoing and there will be more clarity whenever the Executive agrees funding for my Department for next year.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 targets, which expire in 2020, or any replacement, have been taken into consideration in the Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 528/17-22)

Mr Poots: The revised Waste Framework Directive (2008/98/EC) (rWFD) requires competent authorities to establish a waste management plan which sets out an analysis of the current waste management situation in the geographical entity concerned. The Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland fulfils the requirements of the rWFD. Unlike a strategy, the Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland does not set strategic direction (e.g. introduce new policy measures), but rather provides a moment-in-time review of waste management in Northern Ireland, with a forward look at future policies being considered.

The packaging and producer responsibility section of the Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland confirms that targets are in place until 2020. It also mentions the consultation on reforming the UK packaging producer responsibility system which will be used to inform future policy and targets.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the Strategic Investment Board analysis and forecast for future residential waste has been taken into consideration in the Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 529/17-22)

Mr Poots: The revised Waste Framework Directive (2008/98/EC) (rWFD) requires competent authorities to establish a waste management plan which sets out an analysis of the current waste management situation in the geographical entity concerned. The Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland fulfils the requirements of the rWFD. Unlike a strategy, the Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland does not set strategic direction (e.g. introduce new policy measures), but rather provides a moment-in-time review of waste management in Northern Ireland, with a forward look at future policies being considered.

The Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland references the study being conducted by Strategic Investment Board to analyse and forecast future residential waste and identify infrastructure needs. This study will provide evidence for future policy development.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the Marine Plan for Northern Ireland has been incorporated into the Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 530/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland provides a moment-in-time review of waste management in Northern Ireland, with a forward look at future policies being considered. It considers other relevant plans and programmes. The Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland references the current draft Marine Plan for Northern Ireland under its consideration of marine waste and litter.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the Waste Prevention Programme has been incorporated into the Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 532/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department has developed the Waste Prevention Programme as a separate entity to the Waste Management Plan as permitted by the Waste Framework Directive.

A consultation on the interim Waste Prevention Programme commenced on 22nd January 2020 and will run for a period of eight weeks until 18th March 2020. The link to the consultation is:

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/waste-prevention-programme-northern-ireland-2019>.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his plans to introduce a climate change bill. (AQW 578/17-22)

Mr Poots: I refer you to my previous response to AQW 308/17-22.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his Department's plans to control the increase in the Reeves' muntjac population.

(AQW 579/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department funded a scientific survey in 2013-14 which confirmed the presence of a small population of approximately six Muntjac on an estate on the Ards Peninsula. My Department also chairs a control group, set up to address the eradication of Muntjac on that estate, whilst providing a forum to discuss related Muntjac control issues. This population has now been reduced; possibly to 1-2 individuals.

To address reports of Muntjac in other areas of Northern Ireland the Department has established a partnership arrangement with two countryside organisations to control Muntjac in areas where their presence has been confirmed. The Department's NIEA and Forest Service are also involved in monitoring and control efforts.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how many applications for tree felling licenses have been received, in each of the last three years; and (ii) how many of these have been granted.

(AQW 581/17-22)

Mr Poots: Felling licence applications received and granted in accordance with the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 for the last three years are detailed in the table below.

Year	Applications received	Applications granted	Applications withdrawn
2016/17	58	52	6
2017/18	49	43	6
2018/19	54	54	0

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether Northern Ireland is in breach of ammonia targets, as set out by the European Union.

(AQW 591/17-22)

Mr Poots: Under the National Emission Ceilings Directive (NECD), the European Union sets emission ceilings for each member state, including the United Kingdom. UK ammonia emissions comply with current obligations under EU legislation and international agreements. The revised Gothenburg Protocol and National Emissions Ceilings Directive require the UK to reduce ammonia emissions from 2005 levels by 8% and 16% by 2020 and 2030. There is no specific target for Northern Ireland under this legislation but Northern Ireland is expected to contribute to the achievement of the UK targets.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the upgrades to Gortin Glens Forest Park.

(AQW 592/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA provided match financial support to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council in 2019 which facilitated the completion of a destination adventure play facility and the enhancement and upgrading of walking and mountain bike trails. This work will be complemented by the creation of a new fit for purpose visitor amenity centre, additional mountain bike trails and extended walking trails in 2020. These upgrades will provide opportunities for visitors to get active, spend the day exploring the natural environment and improve their health and well-being.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to outline what action his Department is taking to stop unauthorised dredging of the River Foyle; and (ii) whether his Department has met its legal obligations to protect the waterway.

(AQW 594/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department contacted the individual who is dredging the river and alerted that dredging the tidal river is subject to a licence in the Northern Ireland zone. This has been followed up with regular patrols at the site, in partnership with the Loughs Agency. No dredging has been recorded in the Northern Ireland area since the letter was issued.

If dredging recommences, my officials will exercise enforcement action under the Marine & Coastal Access Act 2009, thereby protecting the waterway in the future. I am aware that there is reciprocal enforcement action being taken forward in the Republic of Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what (i) short; and (ii) long-term action his Department is planning in response to the recommendations in the Alison Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship. (AQW 595/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has no short term plans in response to the recommendations in the Alison Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship. However, longer term, Officials are currently leading the development of a draft Rural Policy Framework which includes a strategic goal 'To create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish'.

The Alison Rose review formed part of the research considered in the development of a key aim to develop the entrepreneurial leadership, capacity and capability skills of rural business owners (new and existing). There will also be a focus on farmers and farm families who want to diversify, youth, women and social enterprises.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how his Department has improved farm safety for (i) families; and (ii) employees. (AQW 645/17-22)

Mr Poots: Health and Safety is the remit of the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland, however, I continue to show my commitment to the safety of our farm families and employees through significant work in a number of different ways.

You will be aware of the work of the Farm Safety Partnership (FSP), within which my Department has a number of key roles in collaboration with other industry partners.

The 'Stop and Think SAFE' farm safety multi media campaign, was developed by the FSP to help tackle the high rates of serious accidents and deaths on Northern Ireland's farms. It raises the issues of the four main causes of fatalities on our farms - Slurry, Animals, Falls (from height) and Equipment. My Department continues to provide funding for this ongoing high profile and often hard hitting campaign.

Farm safety is a high priority across all programmes that are delivered through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and Health and Safety is a key component of these programmes.

For example, all new full-time, Further Education agriculture students participate in the Yellow Wellies Farm Safety initiative which is delivered by the Farm Safety Foundation. The education and training provision on the safe operation of machinery at CAFRE has been further enhanced through the use of simulated driving technology. This innovative technology enables learners to be taught and to practice operating tractors with different implements, under a range of conditions in a simulated environment, prior to putting the skills developed into practice in the real working environment.

During July and August each year CAFRE also provides a tractor driving training course for 13 to 16 year old young people. This course includes Health and Safety, Legal requirements, Safe use of tractors on the farm, and how to safely use trailers and other implements.

CAFRE also delivers the Rural Development Programme Business Development Groups (BDGs) and Farm Family Key Skills (FFKS) Schemes. Almost 3000 farmers participate in the BDGs and to date 2119 have attended Health and Safety training, which is an integral part of the scheme. In addition, all BDGs participants have Health and Safety as a component part of their Farm Business Development Plan which is reviewed annually.

Within the FFKS Scheme, 771 people have undertaken Health & Safety Awareness training which aimed to create more awareness of the risks that exist on farms and encourage activities and work practices that create a safer working environment for all the farm family. Over 2,100 farm family members have also been trained in First Aid Awareness.

The recently launched 'Coping with the Pressures of Farming' course, which is delivered by Rural Support, focuses on farmers' mental wellbeing. It has been developed in response to a growing body of evidence that stress and anxiety impact on farmers' wellbeing and their ability to do their job and a suggested link between increasing stress levels in farming and increasing risks for farm accidents to occur. The training focuses on helping farm families recognise the signs of stress, the potential causes, practical steps to address the causes and where to seek help when required. To date around 120 people have participated in this course.

FarmsafeNet, the online learning tool designed to raise awareness of Farm Safety is still available at www.farmsafenet.org. It provides a range of useful resources along with practical information, all to encourage farmers to think seriously about safety on their farm. In addition, the 'Making it Safer' tool, is included in FarmsafeNet, which allows farmers to carry out a simple risk assessment that can help them manage their farm in such a way that it is safer for themselves, families and employees.

These online farm safety tools are an integral part of the application process for the Farm Business Improvement - Capital Schemes, however, I strongly recommend that all farmers, farm family members and farm workers access these online tools.

My Department will continue to work collaboratively with its partners on the FSP to help drive home the importance of farm safety and develop a safety-first culture on our local farms. It is however, the farmers and those living and working on our farms that must put into practice those actions that are required to minimise or eliminate the risks of serious injury or death on our farms.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the income generated through the carrier bag levy, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 662/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department have published official validated statistics each year since the introduction of the levy in 2013 and income generated in each of the last five years is detailed in the table below –

Period	Income Generated
2014/15	£4.6 Million
2015/16	£5.2 Million
2016/17	£5 Million
2017/18	£4.9 Million
2018/19	£4.6 Million

The next set of official validated statistics for the period 2019 - 2020 will be published at the end of August 2020.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to provide an assurance that the economic importance of agriculture will be recognised in the Programme for Government.

(AQW 671/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am happy to provide an assurance that I will be seeking the support of my Executive colleagues in ensuring that the PfG reflects the importance of agriculture and the contribution it makes to the Northern Ireland economy, the environment and rural society.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps have been taken to (i) ensure anaerobic digestion (AD) plants require a waste management licence and a Habitats Regulation Assessment; and (ii) ensure that data held by the AD industry relating to AD Biofertiliser Certification Scheme Quality Protocol is released to the public under (a) Freedom of Information; and (b) Environmental Information Regulations.

(AQW 729/17-22)

Mr Poots: Operators of Anaerobic Digestion (AD) plants which accept waste as input material, are required to hold a waste authorisation under The Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 or The Pollution Prevention and Control (Industrial Emissions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013. NIEA carries out a Habitats Regulations Assessment on all applications received for a waste authorisation relating to AD plants prior to granting a licence or a permit. NIEA has worked closely with central and local planning departments, and OFGEM to identify all AD plants that exist or are being planned for in Northern Ireland to ensure they are regulated where required.

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Environmental Information Regulations 2004 provide the public with rights to request information held by public authorities. They do not apply to data held by the AD industry.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps have been taken to ensure the Expert Working Group more accurately reflects the environmental views of all interested parties.

(AQW 732/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Expert Working Group (EWG) was established by DAERA in 2014. The Group's membership where drawn from across a spectrum of stakeholders with an interest in land use, including farmers, the supply chain and environmentalists. Each member of the group had relevant experience and expertise in the area of land management, agriculture and the environment.

The EWG chairman has a background in both the farming and environmental sectors (as a former President of the UFU, Chair of the DEFRA Rural Climate Change Forum and a Sustainable Development Commissioner). Two members have had careers associated, in particular, with the environment sector.

All members served on an unpaid and voluntary basis and their work was advisory in nature. Members are not representative of any organisations with which they may currently or previously have been associated with.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the cost of remedial works for the Mobuoy Road illegal waste site formed part of the recent negotiations with the UK government; and what resources have been set aside to address (i) the illegal deposition of waste adjacent to the River Faughan and Tributaries' Special Area of Conservation; and (ii) the problem of illegal waste disposal affecting Northern Ireland.

(AQW 745/17-22)

Mr Poots: The cost to remediate the Mobuoy Road site did not form part of the recent negotiations with the UK Government.

DAERA recognises the huge importance of dealing with the illegal wastes deposited at Mobouy Road and has resourced a specific project team to develop a remediation strategy for the site and to work with Northern Ireland Water (NIW) to put in

place contingency plans to protect the public water drinking supply. A specific business case for remediation of the Mobuoy Road site is under development and the key priority is to protect public health and the environment. A number of options to deal with the waste are being considered and the costs are likely to be significant.

The Project to remediate the site is moving forward in a 3-stage approach, the first part of which is to prepare for the remediation; in July 2019 the Department of Finance approved part 1 of the business case (OBC1) for this, with approval to spend an initial £2.2M. While DAERA secured funding of £0.5M in 2019/20, bids have been submitted for subsequent financial years. In addition to extensive ongoing monitoring to ensure the public drinking water supply remains safe, the current preparation stage includes appointing an integrated design team and developing and costing the detailed remediation strategy. Once this has been done, part 2 of the business case (OBC2) will be presented to seek approval for the full cost of the remediation work.

NIEA has a dedicated Enforcement Branch responsible for the identification and investigation of illegal waste sites within NI. The Branch is resourced with 38 staff and will, where appropriate, seek to prosecute those responsible for illegal waste disposal through the criminal courts.

The Agency, under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, may also ask the court to award a confiscation order against those convicted of illegal waste offending. The amount of that order is dependent on the determined criminal benefit taking into account the value of the available assets. The Agency receives 22.5% of the amount of the Order and this is used to support the work of the Branch in tackling this type of criminality and in driving up asset recovery.

Further, under the 'polluter pays principle' the Agency will also, where possible, place the onus for clean up on the offender or in default seek to recover the costs should the Agency be required to intervene. An annual budget is also allocated for the clean-up of smaller scale waste deposits (generally fly-tipping) where the offender cannot be identified. Over the last 3 years this budget has averaged £143,000 per annum.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the Executive will initiate a public inquiry into illegal waste disposal, as agreed by the Assembly in March 2014.

(AQW 746/17-22)

Mr Poots: Since 2014, there have been significant improvements to the management and regulation of the waste sector following the Mills review.

I will not initiate a public inquiry but instead focus resources on ensuring the improvements emanating from the Mills review are built upon.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of staff (i) currently located; and (ii) proposed to be located, at his Department's headquarters in Ballykelly.

(AQW 784/17-22)

Mr Poots: The DAERA Departmental Headquarters, Ballykelly House opened at the end of April 2018.

As of 1 January 2020 there are 323 DAERA staff located in Ballykelly House.

The Department's objective, agreed with Minister Michelle McIlveen in 2016, was to have at least 320 posts in Ballykelly by 2021, however the Department currently expects to have relocated a total of 407 staff by then.

Department for Communities

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities to detail the expenditure to date on the Casement Park project.

(AQW 184/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): The 'New Decade, New Approach' deal (2020) states that 'The Executive will advance with plans to complete both the Regional and Sub Regional Stadia Programmes which includes Casement Park'. I am fully committed to delivering on this commitment

The redevelopment of Casement Park is an Executive Programme for Government 2011-15 priority, and this commitment is repeated within the Programme for Government 2016. The Casement Park Stadium is the final project of the Regional Stadia Programme. The Kingspan Stadium (UBIRFU) and the Windsor Park Stadium (IFA) are now delivering benefits in their operational phases.

To date £10,276,918 of grant funding has been expended by the Department on the Casement Park Project. Expenditure is related to eligible development costs, including: project related employment and governance, legal costs, surveys, statutory fees, business case development, design and pre-construction activities.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Communities to outline (i) what measures are in place; and (ii) what work has been implemented to tackle loneliness.

(AQW 246/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department's Arms Length Bodies, Libraries NI and National Museums NI, provide a range of programmes which help combat loneliness and social isolation. In addition, Departmental officials are currently preparing a scoping study on loneliness. As loneliness is a cross-cutting issue, input to the study will be sought from other Departments. When the study is finalised, I will consider its findings in the context of the Department's future work in relation to this issue.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) how many homes are in severe fuel poverty; and (ii) when they will no longer be in this position.

(AQW 247/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

- (i) The Northern Ireland House Condition Survey (2016) estimated that approximately 160,000 or 22% of homes were in fuel poverty. Of those homes in fuel poverty approximately 44,000 or 6% were estimated to be in 'severe' fuel poverty. Severe fuel poverty is defined as needing to spend more than 15% of income, including benefits, to maintain a satisfactory level of heating (21°C in the living room and 18°C in other occupied rooms).

My Department and our delivery partners in the Housing Executive and local Councils remain committed to delivering the Affordable Warmth Scheme to target and assist those homes most at risk of fuel poverty. Since its introduction in 2015 the Scheme has invested more than £73 million to improve the energy efficiency of almost 17,500 homes.

- (ii) Three factors influence fuel poverty (fuel prices, household energy use and income). Given that two of these are outside my Department's control it is not possible to predict when households currently in fuel poverty will no longer be in that position. However, the Department and its delivery partners remain committed to delivering the Affordable Warmth Scheme to reduce fuel poverty.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to revise the NI Housing Executive adaptations procedures to ensure they are carried out in an expeditious manner.

(AQW 252/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive successfully piloted an internal major adaptations review within the South Region in 18/19. This included a streamlining of processes as well as the introduction of an in-house Design Team. This team has eliminated the requirement for external Consultants and as a result has reduced the timeframe for delivery of major adaptations within the region.

The Housing Executive has now moved towards a similar strategy for the North Region and is also reviewing its service delivery provisions in the Belfast Region.

The Housing Executive is preparing a new major adaptations contract which will be tendered in the coming months. It is anticipated that it will accelerate the delivery of projects and increase the number of Contractors that may be awarded within any contract area.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities to detail the level of funding available for the Safety at Sports Grounds scheme.

(AQW 272/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department, through SportNI, has provided capital funding of £200,000 per annum in 2018/19 and 2019/20 to address safety issues at designated sports grounds. The funding provided grounds with modern CCTV systems and covered the upgrading of Public Address Systems.

These were identified by Sport NI and the Sports Grounds Safety Authority as priority areas for the improvement of safety management at grounds. In 2018/19, 11 designated sports grounds benefitted from this investment, whilst 18 grounds are expected to benefit by the end of 2019/20.

In addition, the Department provided £100,000 of capital funding in 2019/20 to Sport NI to address urgent health and safety works at sports venues.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Sub Regional Stadia Programme for local football.

(AQW 276/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Advancement of plans to complete the Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is an Executive commitment in the "New Decade, New Approach" agreement.

I am fully committed to delivering on this priority area and to meeting the current and future needs of the game.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) all Irish language groups and organisations within that sector that are recognised and supported by the Department and; (ii) how much funding has been provided to each such group/organisation, either directly by the Department or through arm's-length bodies, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 318/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department for Communities jointly funds Foras na Gaeilge with Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht on a 25:75 basis and has provided funding to Foras na Gaeilge in the last five calendar years (£stg) as follows:

Calendar Year	(£stg)
2015	£2,840,641
2016	£3,140,966
2017	£3,285,812
2018	£3,318,664
2019	£3,309,404

I would refer the Member to The Government Funding Database which provides details of all funding provided by the public sector, including Arm's Length Bodies, to groups within the voluntary and community sector, including the Irish language sector.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail all departmental decisions that were not taken in the absence of a Minister during the period January 2017 to January 2020.

(AQW 324/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The following departmental decisions were not taken in the absence of a Minister during the period January 2017 to January 2020:

- A Review of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995.
- Establishment of a Regional Disability Forum.
- Regulation 4 of the Sex Discrimination Order 1976 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 - requires a gender based review of the regulatory system for insurance services to be conducted.
- Section 19 of the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 – The Gender Pay Gap – both the transfer of legislative responsibility from the Executive Office to Department for Communities and subsequent implementation of S19.
- Development of an Anti-Poverty (Social) Strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need.
- Development of a Child Poverty Strategy.
- Re-appointment of Sport NI Board members.
- Appointment of Northern Ireland (NI) Representative to the Board of Horse Sport Ireland.
- Chair of Sport NI being appointment to the Board of UK Sport.
- Delivery of Sub Regional Soccer Stadia Programme.
- Review of People & Place: A Strategy for Neighbourhood renewal and associated tackling deprivation programmes including Small Pockets of Deprivation and Areas at Risk.
- Decision on way forward for Sign Language following consultation in 2016.
- The North South Co-Operation (Implementation Bodies) (N Ireland) Order 1999 requires the Corporate and Business Plans of the North South Language Body to be formally approved by the North South Ministerial Council.
- Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Act 2017. As part of the Legislative Consent Motion which was passed in the NI Assembly in October 2016 and in line with the rest of the UK, a Minister is required to grant permission for certain bodies and individuals to use the protection emblem in Northern Ireland and is also required to publish NI Guidance.
- Appointment of W5 Education Board member.
- Appointments to National Museums NI Board.
- Appointment of Chair of NI Museums Council.
- Libraries Public Lending Right (PLR) Rate per Loan scheme - Legislative Consent Motion required to be brought through the NI Assembly to ensure parity between e-books and physical/audio books.
- Signing off the Arts Council NI 5-Year Strategy.
- Appointments to the Arts Council NI Board.
- Appointments for a chair and members for the Historic Buildings Council.
- The Local Government Regulations Rates Support Grant (RSG) Regulations (under Section 27 of the Local Government Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 2011).
- Primary Legislation on De-Rating Grant (DRG) (under Section 26 of the Local Government Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 2011).
- Decisions on the reform of liquor licensing and gambling regulation.
- Review of monetary limits for gaming machines and associated social responsibility issues.
- Decisions on the review of the entertainment licensing regime.

- Approval of the Departmental response on the revised Northern Ireland Local Government Code of Conduct for Councillors.
- Decision on the way forward for the protection of Minority Interests in Councils' decision making and the draft Local Government (Standing Orders) Regulations (Northern Ireland).
- Approval of the Departmental response on the Draft Local Government (Consequential Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland).
- Transfer of Functions Order 2017 - transfer of The Appeals Service from Department for Communities to Department of Justice.
- Legislation to reverse the Office of National Statistics reclassification of Registered Housing Associations to the private sector to act on an Executive decision of September 2016.
- Consideration of the requested NIHE rent increase for 2018/19.
- A review of social housing allocations.
- Decision on how to meet the Housing Executive investment challenge.
- Review of eligibility for the Affordable Warmth Scheme
- Review of the Private Rented Sector.
- Review of the Empty Homes Strategy.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities what actions her Department has taken to address the failings of the Charity Commission of the judgement in the case of McKee and Ors v Charity Commission by the Chancery Division of the High Court by Madam Justice McBride in 2019.

(AQW 348/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Judgment of Madam Justice McBride has been appealed by the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (CCNI) and is due to be heard in the Court of Appeal on 3 February 2020. My Department is enjoined in this appeal. In the absence of Ministers officials agreed the establishment of a decision making Committee by the Commission following the Judgment on 16 May 2019. This Committee is making emergency decisions only. Officials continue to work with the Commission to determine how it can operate in the longer term should the Judgment be confirmed on appeal.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities to outline (i) when the Ombudsman report into her Department's administration of Personal Independence Payments will be published; and (ii) whether this report will be made available to MLAs.

(AQW 372/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department is co-operating fully with the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's investigation into the administration of Personal Independence Payment. The arrangements for publication of a report is a matter for the Ombudsman's office.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department will take action to facilitate the reversal of the planning decision in relation to the historical site at Knock Iveagh, in light of the departmental Freedom of Information response to Friends of Knock Iveagh.

(AQW 375/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Planning decisions are in the remit of local council planning authorities. DfC offers advice as a statutory consultee. Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council continues to consider discontinuing permission for a wind turbine at Knock Iveagh. My Department's Historic Environment Division has engaged closely with the Council on issues associated with the turbine and has offered advice on various matters. Any decision to discontinue the planning permission is, however, in law a matter for the planning authority and the member should therefore take this matter up with Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities for an update on an extension of the welfare mitigation measures.

(AQW 398/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department is taking all necessary steps to provide for an extension of the existing welfare mitigations schemes. This includes ensuring that the appropriate legislation, "New Decade, New Approach", will be in place by 31 March 2020.

I am also engaging with Executive colleagues to secure the estimated £40.4m per year of funding required to continue with the delivery of the welfare mitigation payments.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Communities when the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer will be open for applications; and what criteria will be used for shortlisting.

(AQW 416/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Advancement of plans to complete the Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is an executive commitment in the "New Decade, New Approach" agreement.

I am fully committed to delivering on this priority area and to meeting the current and future needs of the game.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister for Communities whether she will visit Omagh Community House to meet community leaders to discuss the role, function and future of the Community House.

(AQW 435/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I would be delighted to visit Omagh Community House. I am aware that the facility provides office space for a range of voluntary and community sector organisations, including Omagh Volunteer, which is funded by my Department as part of our commitment to supporting volunteering.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Communities how many (i) one bedroom; (ii) two bedroom; and (iii) three bedroom houses have been sold to sitting tenants by the Housing Executive in the last three years, broken down by area office.

(AQW 452/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The tables below show the number of houses sold to sitting tenants by the Housing Executive, broken down by number of bedrooms and by area office. This data covers the years 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 up to and including 22nd January 2020.

2016/17

Area Office	1 Bedroom	2 Bedroom	3 Bedroom	4 Bedroom	5 Bedroom	Total
Lisburn & Castlereagh	1	10	14	1		26
North Belfast		5	10			15
South & East Belfast	1	22	19			42
West Belfast		9	21	3		33
Belfast Region	2	46	64	4		116
Mid Ulster		2	12	2	1	17
North Down & Ards		6	14	1		21
South		6	32	8	1	47
South Down		5	23	1		29
South West	1	2	15	2		20
South Region	1	21	96	14	2	134
Causeway	1	8	28	1		38
East	1	6	24	2		33
South Antrim		9	27	2		38
West	1	8	30	4		43
North Region	3	31	109	9		152
Total	6	98	269	27	2	402

2017/18

Area Office	1 Bedroom	2 Bedroom	3 Bedroom	4 Bedroom	5 Bedroom	Total
Lisburn & Castlereagh	1	14	16	1	1	33
North Belfast		11	13	1		25
South & East Belfast	3	17	13	1		34
West Belfast	1	12	29	1		43
Belfast Region	5	54	71	4	1	135
Mid Ulster		8	14	3		25
North Down & Ards		4	15			19
South	1	8	41	7		57

Area Office	1 Bedroom	2 Bedroom	3 Bedroom	4 Bedroom	5 Bedroom	Total
South Down		7	23	3		33
South West		3	23	2		27
South Region	1	30	116	15		162
Causeway		6	25		1	32
East		5	18	1		24
South Antrim	4	10	19	4		37
West	2	10	28	6		46
North Region	6	31	90	11	1	139
Total	12	115	277	30	2	436

2018/19

Area Office	1 Bedroom	2 Bedroom	3 Bedroom	4 Bedroom	5 Bedroom	6 Bedroom	Total
Lisburn & Castlereagh		6	15				21
North Belfast		8	10	3			21
South & East Belfast	1	19	16				36
West Belfast		22	30				52
Belfast Region	1	55	71	3			130
Mid Ulster		1	18	1			20
North Down & Ards	1	10	19	1		1	32
South		13	47	7			67
South Down		7	26	2	1		36
South West		2	19	2			23
South Region	1	33	129	13	1		178
Causeway		8	18	1	1		28
East		7	19				26
South Antrim		5	19	3			27
West	3	9	37	9			58
North Region	3	29	93	13	1		139
Total							

2019/2020

Area Office	1 Bedroom	2 Bedroom	3 Bedroom	4 Bedroom	5 Bedroom	Total
Lisburn & Castlereagh	1	4	12	1		18
North Belfast	2	4	11	2	1	20
South & East Belfast	2	11	15			28
West Belfast		8	22	2		32
Belfast Region	5	27	60	5	1	98
Mid Ulster		4	17			21
North Down & Ards		6	17	4		27
South	1	6	35	7	1	50
South Down		3	14	3		20

Area Office	1 Bedroom	2 Bedroom	3 Bedroom	4 Bedroom	5 Bedroom	Total
South West	2	1	10	1		14
South Region	3	20	93	15	1	132
Causeway		4	17			21
East	1	5	17			23
South Antrim	1	7	21	1		30
West		5	42	4	1	52
North Region	2	21	97	5	1	126
Total	10	68	250	25	3	356

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Communities whether she is aware of (i) the proposals to establish an all-island soccer league; and (ii) the Irish Football Association's response to this proposal.
(AQW 455/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am aware of the proposals to establish an all-island football league. I would encourage the Irish Football Association (IFA), the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) and the respective clubs, and other stakeholders to engage in an open conversation about future arrangements that would benefit the game.

It is my understanding that the IFA announced on 31 October that it would not sanction any of its clubs to take part in an all-island football league but that it would continue to work with the FAI to develop all-island cup competitions at all levels.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Communities what her plans are for addressing the funding shortage for the Arts Council.
(AQW 457/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I appreciate the valuable contribution the Arts sector makes to our communities and I am fully committed to ensuring I represent the sector at the Executive to keep it firmly on the agenda.

I am pleased that the opening budget allocation for 2019-20 realised an increase on the previous year's funding. The Arts Council also secured an additional £959k in resource and £500k in capital funding during this year.

I am keen that the partnership working between my department and the Arts Council continues to thrive to ensure the delivery of my priorities and look for innovative ways of connecting people to the Arts.

My department is also working in collaboration with the Arts Council and Arts & Business NI on an exciting proposal aimed at enabling resilience and sustainability for small to mid-scale arts organisations. I plan to continue the links across departments, with councils and with business to support and encourage community participation in the Arts.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Communities what action (i) is being taken; or (ii) will be taken to address the increase of gambling addiction.
(AQW 458/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I recognise that the current legislation on gambling is outdated; it has not kept pace with industry and technological changes and does not contain adequate protections for vulnerable people.

My Department conducted Gambling Prevalence Surveys in 2010 and 2016. Both surveys found a problem gambling rate of over 2%, approximately four times higher than that recorded in Great Britain.

A consultation on the "Regulation of Gambling in NI" was launched on 16 December 2019. It will close on 21 February 2020. The purpose of the consultation is to seek views on the appropriateness of the current law and to identify areas of gambling activity which should be included in any future legislation. My officials will analyse the responses received and I hope to announce the way forward by the summer.

As the issue of problem gambling is also a matter for the Minister of Health, I have referred this question to him. He has commented that at the present time there are no gambling specific services commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board ('HSCB'). However, where problem gambling causes mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression, appropriate help and support is provided in line with clinical need and current service provision for mental health.

This treatment is delivered by the provider of the service based on clinical need through an assessment, in line with the Regional Mental Health Care Pathway. Gambling support is also available in the community and voluntary sector, through Gamblers Anonymous, Addiction NI, GamCare and Dunlewey Addiction Service. This is particularly relevant where there is no recognised clinical need for treatment.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the public realm scheme for Ballygowan.
(AQW 476/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department does not have any plans to progress a public realm scheme for Ballygowan. In regional towns, Councils normally take the lead in the appointment of a consultancy team to design a public realm scheme which is then submitted to the Department for consideration. The Department has not received a proposal for a public realm scheme in Ballygowan.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of complaints received in relation to errors with Universal Credit claims.
(AQW 515/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department's complaints system does not include a category specifically for 'errors with a claim'. From the available data, the Department has received a total of 73 complaints since the introduction of Universal Credit on 27 September 2017. This equates to 0.12% of the current Universal Credit caseload.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the training provided to staff administering Universal Credit.
(AQW 516/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department is committed to delivering a professional and supportive service and Case Managers, First Contact Teams, Digital Coaches, Work Coaches and Decision Makers undergo a comprehensive programme of learning and development designed to equip them with the tools, skills and behaviours required to provide a high quality, responsive service to all, including the vulnerable and those with complex needs.

This includes technical training on the Universal Credit computer system and the digital up-skilling of those delivering the service; specific training relating to the individual's job role; and more specialist training for example on childcare and earnings.

In addition, our Work Coaches are undergoing a programme of training to obtain a British Institute of Innkeeping Accreditation Board (BIIBAB) accredited qualification in Employment Related Service and are receiving specific training on working with people with health conditions and/or addictions. Work Coaches are also supported by the Department's Work Psychologists to improve their capability to better support people with a health condition or disability.

Working with a broad range of partners, for example MacMillan Cancer and Disability NI; workshops have been delivered to explain how a health condition or disability may impact a person's daily life. In addition, Suicide Awareness training has been delivered to those working in Universal Credit.

The Universal Credit teams are also completing Just A Minute (JAM) Card training so that the network of Jobs & Benefits offices and Service Centres are recognised as JAM Card friendly and the Department is working with Autism NI on piloting, in the Lurgan Jobs & Benefits office, autism training for our Work Coaches and First Contact Team. Working with the Council for the Homeless, Homelessness Awareness training has also been provided.

Finally, supporting information and desk aids which are regularly updated are available on the Universal Credit Guidance intranet site which enhances learning, and is available at the point of need for each individual personal requirement.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what engagement her Department has had with the Minister of Finance or Executive colleagues to ring-fence funding for welfare supplementary payments.
(AQW 517/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Senior officials within the Department have been liaising with senior officials in the Department of Finance in relation to mitigations beyond March 2020. The Department has provided estimates the future funding required (£40.4m) for welfare supplementary payments as part of the Department of Finance commissioned budget exercises and also to inform costing of 'New Decade, New Approach'. As Minister I will work with the Executive to extend existing mitigations measures beyond March 2020.

Departmental officials continue to liaise with Department of Finance officials as we seek to secure this funding to continue to provide financial support for claimants who have been impacted by welfare reforms.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Communities whether there are plans to increase the Rates Support Grant to Councils.
(AQW 527/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The level of the Rates Support Grant (RSG) budget for 2020/21 will be set when the Departmental Budget has been confirmed. The overall level of RSG that will be available next year can only be considered in the context of the wider budgetary position affecting the Department for the 2020/21 financial year.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister for Communities whether she will visit Omagh Community House and meet with community leaders to discuss the role, function and future of the Community House.
(AQW 536/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I would be delighted to visit Omagh Community House. I am aware that the facility provides office space for a range of voluntary and community sector organisations, including Omagh Volunteer, which is funded by my Department as part of our commitment to supporting volunteering.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities (i) whether she intends to reintroduce the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill; (ii) whether a new consultation is required; and (iii) the timeline she intends to follow.
(AQW 619/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

- (i) The reform of licensing laws is an Executive priority under the New Decade, New Approach Deal and will require primary legislation with the agreement of the Executive.
- (ii) The Department recently carried out a public consultation to determine public opinion on current licensing laws. The consultation closed on 6 December 2019 and received 1500 responses. No further consultation is planned.
- (iii) The responses to the consultation are currently being analysed and an outcome report will be provided for my consideration over the coming weeks. I am keen to move this matter forward as soon as possible.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to outline her Departmental priorities for (i) 2020/21; and (ii) 2021/22.
(AQW 620/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Departmental priorities for (i) 2020/21; and (ii) 2021/22 will be informed by ongoing discussions with Executive colleagues, senior Departmental officials and other stakeholders. I'm committed to protecting the most vulnerable in our society including children and young people, those with disabilities and low income families. I want to ensure the targeting of resources based on objective need, a focus on community engagement and embedding a human rights based approach in our policies and services.

The key priorities for my Department are outlined within the New Decade, New Approach Agreement and these include:

Welfare Reform Mitigation Schemes; Housing agenda, including Office of National Statistics (ONS) Reclassification; Delivery of Regional and Sub Regional Stadia Programmes; Language, Culture and Arts commitments; Development of key strategies, including an Anti-Poverty Strategy; and Reform of liquor licensing laws and regulation of gambling.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department intends to review the definition of Terminal Illness applied in Northern Ireland in the Personal Independence Payment process.
(AQW 623/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department is already working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on an in-depth evaluation of how the benefits system supports people nearing the end of their life and those with the most severe conditions. This review includes all benefits which contain special rules provision for those who are terminally ill.

My officials are ensuring that issues highlighted by stakeholders here are fully reflected in the review. As part of this, in December 2019, the Department for Communities held an engagement event in Belfast with expert stakeholders from Macmillan, Marie Curie NI, Age NI, Motor Neurone Disease Association NI and the British Medical Association, to ensure their views were captured and taken into account.

I am committed to ensuring local views are heard on this sensitive issue and my Department will continue to work with DWP on the evaluation, which contains three main strands of research:

- hearing directly from claimants and charities about their first-hand experiences;
- considering international evidence to find out what works in other nations and the support they provide; and reviewing current performance to better understand how Special Rules for Terminal Illness and Severe Conditions processes operate and perform.

I will ensure my officials continue to work with DWP on the next phase of the review which will involve seeking input from those who have first-hand experience of terminal illness provision, including clinicians, claimants and others supporting people applying for benefit.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities to detail staff costs for each local council in each of the last five financial years.
(AQW 695/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The information requested is already in the public domain and is readily available on individual council websites in their annual financial report and accounts.

Links to the latest annual accounts on council websites are given below:

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	https://antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk/getmedia/e85240d9-dc82-409a-95a7-81d1875c61b0/Signed-Certified-Accounts-2018-19.pdf.aspx
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Ards and North Down Borough Council	https://www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk/downloads/Ards_and_North_Down_BC_201819_Certified_Accounts.pdf
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	https://www.armaghbanbridgecraigavon.gov.uk/?s=accounts
Belfast City Council	http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/council/Publications/Financeplan.aspx
Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council	https://www.causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk/council/publications-policies/causeway-coast-and-glens-borough-council-certified-accounts-2018-19
Derry City & Strabane District Council	https://www.derrystrabane.com/getmedia/9af1e1b6-8210-45be-9b5a-18c98b5292b6/Final-Certified-accounts-DCSDC-201819.pdf?ext=.pdf
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	https://www.fermanaghomagh.com/your-council/financial-statements/fermanagh-and-omagh-district-council-certified-accounts-201819-1/
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council	https://www.lisburncastlereagh.gov.uk/uploads/general/LCCC_Certified_Accounts_2018-19.pdf
Mid & East Antrim Borough Council	https://www.midandeantrim.gov.uk/downloads/Annual_Financial_Statements_for_Mid_and_East_Antrim_Borough_Council_for_2018.19.pdf
Mid Ulster District Council	https://www.midulstercouncil.org/getmedia/594dd414-b27e-47b0-afd0-e3d108764035/Statement-of-Accounts-2018-2019.pdf.aspx
Newry, Mourne & Down District Council	https://www.newrymournedown.org/media/uploads/statement_of_accounts_newry_mourne_and_down_district_council_for_the_year_ended_31st_march_2019.pdf

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities to outline the process and timeframe by which her Department will bring forward sign language legislation, as contained in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 726/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am fully supportive of the decision to introduce Sign Language Legislation. Access to services and information through Sign Language is about including some of the most marginalised people in our society, and legislation is needed to ensure that users of both ISL (Irish Sign Language) and BSL (British Sign Language) have the same rights, responsibilities, opportunities and quality of life as those of us in the hearing community.

My officials are currently working on the details and I will publish a timeframe for bringing forward legislation as soon as I am in a position to do so.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Communities to outline the legislative process and indicative timeframe for any reform of liquor licensing laws.

(AQW 740/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The reform of licensing laws, an Executive priority under the New Decade, New Approach Deal, is one which I am keen to move forward as soon as possible.

A consultation exercise to determine public opinion on current licensing laws closed on 6 December 2019.

1,500 responses to that consultation are currently being analysed by my officials who will then produce an outcome report for my consideration. I intend to bring my proposals to the Executive at the earliest opportunity.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities what funding streams are available to assist voluntary search and rescue organisations.

(AQW 783/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department has had responsibility for the governance of Northern Ireland Search and Rescue voluntary groups since 2014. The Department provides annual grant funding to Northern Ireland search and Rescue voluntary groups.

Department of Education

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education, during the recent Westminster election, how many children were unable to attend school because their school building was being used as a polling station.

(AQW 212/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): According to 2018/19 school enrolment figures, approximately 109,478 children were unable to attend school because their school building was being used as a polling station or was adjacent to premises used as a polling station.

A total of 425 establishments formally applied to the Department for an 'Exceptional Closure Day' for the purposes of use as a polling station or had to close for health and safety or access reasons due to the premises being adjacent to a school used as a polling station.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many schools were closed for use as polling stations in the recent Westminster elections.

(AQW 213/17-22)

Mr Weir: According to 2018/19 school enrolment figures, approximately 109,478 children were unable to attend school because their school building was being used as a polling station or was adjacent to premises used as a polling station.

A total of 425 establishments formally applied to the Department for an 'Exceptional Closure Day' for the purposes of use as a polling station or had to close for health and safety or access reasons due to the premises being adjacent to a school used as a polling station.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education whether his Department receives remuneration from the Electoral Office for use of schools as polling stations.

(AQW 214/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department does not receive remuneration from the Electoral Office for the use of schools as polling stations.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education, further to his statement to the Assembly on 14 January 2020, to detail (i) whether he intends to announce further School Enhancement Projects this mandate and; (ii) the list of applications still awaiting decision.

(AQW 216/17-22)

Mr Weir: My statement to the Assembly on 14 January 2020 represented the third tranche of projects to be announced from the Second Call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP). The prioritised lists from this call will remain live to May 2020 and there is therefore the potential for a further, final announcement before the lists expire. As part of the Department's overall capital investment strategy, I will then consider if there should be a third call for applications to SEP.

Under the published protocol for the second SEP call (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enhancement-programme-second-call-protocol-selection>), all applications were subject to Gateway checks. Those schools not filtered out as part of the Gateway process were scored and prioritised lists of projects produced for primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools. The schools remaining on these prioritised lists are set out below:

Primary Schools

- | | |
|---|---|
| ■ Abbey Primary School, Newtownards | ■ Kilbride Primary School, Doagh |
| ■ Acorn Integrated Primary School, Carrickfergus | ■ Kilbroney Controlled Integrated Primary School, Rostrevor |
| ■ Ashgrove Primary School, Glengormley | ■ Kircubbin Controlled Integrated Primary School |
| ■ Ballykelly Primary School, Limavady | ■ Ligoniel Primary School, Belfast |
| ■ Ballymoney Controlled Integrated Primary School | ■ Linn Primary School, Larne |
| ■ Bunscoil An Iúir Newry | ■ Lough View Integrated Primary School, Belfast |
| ■ Carr's Glen Primary School, Belfast | ■ Markethill Primary School |
| ■ Cedar Integrated Primary School, Crossgar | ■ Moneymore Primary School |
| ■ Christian Brothers' Primary School, Armagh | ■ Oakgrove Integrated Primary School, Londonderry |
| ■ Clandeboye Primary School, Bangor | ■ Oakwood Integrated Primary School, Dunmurry |
| ■ Crumlin Controlled Integrated Primary School | ■ Omagh County Primary School |
| ■ D H Christie Memorial Primary School, Coleraine | ■ Our Lady & St Patrick's Primary School, Downpatrick |
| ■ Dundela Primary School, Belfast | ■ Rathmore Primary School, Bangor |
| ■ Gilnahirk Primary School, Belfast | ■ Round Tower Controlled Integrated Primary School, Antrim |
| ■ Grange Park Primary School, Bangor | ■ Seagoe Primary School, Portadown |
| ■ Greenisland Primary School | ■ Spires Integrated Primary School, Magherafelt |
| ■ Greenwood Primary School, Belfast | ■ St Aloysius' Primary School & Nursery School, Lisburn |
| ■ Harmony Hill Primary School, Lisburn | ■ St Bernard's Primary School, Wynchurch Belfast |
| ■ Hart Memorial Primary School, Portadown | |
| ■ Holy Trinity Primary School, Cookstown | |
| ■ Jones Memorial Primary School, Enniskillen | |

- St Brigids Primary School, Magherafelt
- St Comgall's Primary School, Antrim
- St Finian's Primary School, Newtownards
- St John's Primary School, Gilford
- St Patrick's Primary School, Newry
- St Peter's Primary School, Cookstown
- St Ronan's Primary School, Lisnaskea
- Strandtown Primary School, Belfast
- Tandragee Primary School

Whitehead Primary School Post-Primary Schools

- Ashfield Boys' High School, Belfast
- Abbey Christian Brothers' School, Newry
- Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School, Belfast
- Ballyclare High School
- Ballyclare Secondary School
- Ballymena Academy
- Ballymoney High School
- Belfast Royal Academy
- Cambridge House Grammar School, Ballymena
- Carrickfergus Grammar School
- Clounagh Junior High School, Portadown
- Craigavon Senior High School, Portadown
- Dalriada School, Ballymoney
- Edmund Rice College Newtownabbey
- Friends School, Lisburn
- Hunterhouse Grammar School, Belfast
- Limavady Grammar School
- Limavady High School
- Loreto College Coleraine
- Lumen Christi College Londonderry
- Our Lady's Grammar School, Newry
- Rainey Endowed Magherafelt
- Regent House Grammar School, Newtownards
- Sacred Heart Grammar School, Newry
- St Brigid's College, Londonderry
- St Catherine's College, Armagh
- St Columb's College, Londonderry
- St Michael's Grammar School, Enniskillen
- St Pius X College, Magherafelt
- The Royal School, Armagh

Wallace High School, Lisburn Special Schools

- Arvalee Special School, Omagh
- Clifton Special School, Bangor
- Hillcroft School, Newtownabbey
- Willowbridge Special School, Enniskillen

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans for a new build at St Columbanus' College, Bangor. (AQW 266/17-22)

Mr Weir: St Columbanus' College, Bangor, was included in the second tranche of projects announced in January 2019 to advance in planning under the School Enhancement Programme Second Call (SEP2). Departmental officials are currently working with the school to agree the scope of the proposed project.

Paragraph 1.3 of the Protocol for Selection of SEP2 projects specifies that, "Applicants to the second SEP call should note that if they are successful in securing SEP funding that this will remove the school from consideration of a wholly new build school for seven years from the date of approval of funding to their SEP scheme." (The protocol document is available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enhancement-programme-second-call-protocol-selection>)

As the College has been successful in securing major capital investment under SEP, it will not be considered for a wholly new build project for seven years. However I anticipate that the facilities provided under SEP and the Department's minor works programme will have a positive impact on the pupils and staff of St Columbanus' College.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education to outline plans to bring teachers' pay into line with that currently received by their colleagues in Great Britain. (AQW 281/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education is not the employer of teachers. The Teachers' Negotiating Committee (TNC) is the recognised negotiating machinery for teachers' terms and conditions, represented on the trade union side by the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council, which includes the five main teachers' unions and on Management Side, by the main managing authorities, particularly the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, sectoral interests and the Department.

Management and Trade Union Sides of the TNC reached an agreement in principle in June 2019 which has the potential to resolve the long running industrial dispute(s) on teachers' pay and workload. The out-workings of this agreement will bring teachers' salaries broadly in line with that of their GB colleagues at September 2018. A formal offer cannot be made yet to teachers' unions because of the requirement for Department of Finance approval and funding cover. A case for funding has already been made to the Department of Finance, which covers initial funding as well as the additional impact on baselines. I am urgently progressing this in order to implement a teachers' pay award for 2017-18 and 2018-19.

Negotiations for a 2019 pay award will be taken forward separately.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to review the funding model for post-primary schools. (AQW 295/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Transformation Programme includes a Review of the Common Funding Scheme (CFS) Project. The CFS covers all schools funded under Local Management of Schools arrangements, including post-primary schools.

As agreed in New Decade, New Approach, it is proposed that there will be an Independent Review of Education Provision. Consideration is now being given to the design and delivery of such a review, including the extent to which the Independent Review may incorporate the work of the Review of the CFS Project undertaken to date.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Home to School Transport review. (AQW 304/17-22)

Mr Weir: The current home to school transport policy is over 20 years old and a review of the policy was initiated as part of a wider Education Transformation Programme. The aim of the review is to ensure the policy is fit for purpose and sustainable over the long term.

The Department undertook an initial process of engagement with key stakeholders, parents and children in 2019, the results of which will inform the development of a public consultation document.

A wide range of potential policy options are being considered within the Review, and in light of the impact that home to school transport has on many other areas of government, it will be important to ensure a robust evidence base is in place to allow the full impact of any policy change to be taken into account. In this regard, officials will continue to engage with other relevant Departments and key stakeholders.

It is anticipated that a full public consultation process will be undertaken later this year.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail what progress has been made by his Department on each of the sixteen recommendations of the Committee for Education Report on the Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and School Improvement Process from May 2014.

(AQW 306/17-22)

Mr Weir: As outlined in the table below, of the sixteen recommendations made by the Education Committee in June 2014, five were addressed to DE and ten to ETI and one with joint ownership. Ten have been addressed, one partially addressed, and three kept under review. Two have not been addressed which require legislative change.

Recommendation	Owner	Status	Update
1	DE	Kept under review	DE recognises that schools may require support. DE with ETI and the managing authorities continue to support improvement across all schools and keep the provision under review.
2	DE	Not addressed	This would require legislative change.
3	ETI	Addressed and kept under review	Through pre-inspection visits, guidance materials, presentations, dissemination events, use of Associate Assessors and use of Twitter, ETI communicates expectations clearly. Draft inspection reports have never been, and are not, shared with DE prior to publication.
4	ETI	Partially addressed	The ETI complaints procedure allows organisations inspected to challenge inspection findings. When industrial action ends, ETI is ready to add an additional independent element to the process.
5	ETI	Addressed	ETI cooperated with the GTCNI. To ensure rigour, post-inspection evaluations are conducted independently by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.
6	ETI	Addressed	ETI has never used, and does not use, anonymous questionnaires.

Recommendation	Owner	Status	Update
7	ETI	Addressed and kept under review	ETI conforms to the principle of openness and transparency in reporting findings. A separate high-level, summative report as the only report available to parents, carers and the general public would fail the tests of openness, transparency and accountability. ETI has introduced the involvement of a senior leader from the organisation in meetings, including the moderation meeting, in addition to the oral report back at the end of the inspection.
8	ETI	Addressed	New descriptors were implemented from September 2015 following consultation.
9	ETI	Addressed	ETI utilises the role of the district inspector (DI) through allocated ring-fenced days. The DI is usually the deputy reporting inspector on inspections and leads on follow-on work in their district schools.
10	ETI	Addressed and kept under review	ETI employs Irish-speaking inspectors well versed in immersion education and is recruiting a further Irish-medium education (IME) inspector. There are inspectorate exchanges with IME inspectors from the Department of Education and Skills in Dublin.
11	DE	Kept under review	A specific review of assessment is being taken forward as part of the DE transformation programme.
12	ETI	Addressed	ETI has produced a revised range of materials and guidance to promote self-evaluation within schools including the new Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework. DE and the managing authorities promote a culture of self-evaluation through their ongoing work.
13	ETI	Addressed	ETI implemented from September 2016 a number of new inspection models which place the District Inspector centrally and regularly in engagement with the organisation on their continued improvement.
14	DE/ETI	Addressed	Both DE and ETI engage regularly with Parentkind (formerly National Association of Parent-Teacher Associations). DE promotes on-going parental engagement through the campaign "Give your child a helping hand".
15	DE	Kept under review	DE will continue to keep in mind the Committee's view, however, there are currently no plans to change the name of ETI.
16	DE	Not addressed	For ETI to be statutorily independent would require legislative change.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to outline schools' (i) current; and (ii) future plans to help young people build resilience to protect their mental health.

(AQW 311/17-22)

Mr Weir: I recognise the importance of helping to build resilience in our children and young people. It is an essential life skill.

Many schools are providing excellent support for pupils in this and mental health and wellbeing more widely, through the preventative curriculum and tailored pastoral care programmes. They are however emphasising the daily challenges faced in supporting and addressing the needs of their pupils in this area, who they confirm are presenting with increasingly complex issues.

Providing support in tackling these challenges is therefore a key priority for my Department and we are working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and the Education Authority to develop a Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework that aims to enhance support for children and young people, with an emphasis on promotion, prevention and early intervention, including how services can be effectively delivered to support both schools and their pupils.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Education, in the face of the climate change emergency, to outline what actions or policies his Department will (i) take; or (ii) adopt, (a) immediately; (b) in the short term; and (c) in the longer term to help reduce carbon emissions.

(AQW 364/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department invests in a range of measures to reduce carbon emissions within the schools estate. These include efficiency measures such as boiler replacements, installation of led lighting, provision of energy monitors and installing solar panels, as well as encouraging sustainable lifestyles and travel.

In addition the Education Authority, supported by my Department, is again running a competition to identify and reduce single use plastics within schools.

While these are important first steps, my Department also participates in the cross-departmental Future Generations Group, which seeks to address the causes of climate change and to mitigate its impact. Through this, my Department will identify and consider any opportunities to further reduce carbon emissions, including best practice, land use, transport and emergent technologies.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the schools that applied and have not received School Enhancement Programme funding.

(AQW 387/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education received 165 applications for the second call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2) and to date, 59 schools have been announced to advance in planning.

Under the published SEP2 protocol (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enhancement-programme-second-call-protocol-selection>), all applications were subject to Gateway checks. Those schools not filtered out as part of the Gateway process were scored and prioritised lists of projects produced for primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools.

Seventeen schools did not meet the requirements of the Gateway checks and were eliminated. One school was withdrawn from the process by its Managing Authority and four schools have been announced to advance in planning for capital works funded under the Fresh Start Agreement for shared and integrated education, so were removed from the prioritised lists.

There are therefore a total of 84 projects remaining on the prioritised lists and these are detailed below.

Primary Schools (49 schools)

- | | |
|---|--|
| ■ Abbey Primary School, Newtownards | ■ Linn Primary School, Larne |
| ■ Acorn Integrated Primary School, Carrickfergus | ■ Lough View Integrated Primary School, Belfast |
| ■ Ashgrove Primary School, Glengormley | ■ Markethill Primary School |
| ■ Ballykelly Primary School, Limavady | ■ Moneymore Primary School |
| ■ Ballymoney Controlled Integrated Primary School | ■ Oakgrove Integrated Primary School, Londonderry |
| ■ Bunscoil An Iúir Newry | ■ Oakwood Integrated Primary School, Dunmurry |
| ■ Carr's Glen Primary School, Belfast | ■ Omagh County Primary School |
| ■ Cedar Integrated Primary School, Crossgar | ■ Our Lady & St Patrick's Primary School, Downpatrick |
| ■ Christian Brothers' Primary School, Armagh | ■ Rathmore Primary School, Bangor |
| ■ Clandeboye Primary School, Bangor | ■ Round Tower Controlled Integrated Primary School, Antrim |
| ■ Crumlin Controlled Integrated Primary School | ■ Seagoe Primary School, Portadown |
| ■ D H Christie Memorial Primary School, Coleraine | ■ Spires Inetgrated Primary School, Magherafelt |
| ■ Dundela Primary School, Belfast | ■ St Aloysius' Primary School & Nursery School, Lisburn |
| ■ Gilnahirk Primary School, Belfast | ■ St Bernard's Primary School, Wynchurch Belfast |
| ■ Grange Park Primary School, Bangor | ■ St Brigids Primary School, Magherafelt |
| ■ Greenisland Primary School | ■ St Comgall's Primary School, Antrim |
| ■ Greenwood Primary School, Belfast | ■ St Finian's Primary School, Newtownards |
| ■ Harmony Hill Primary School, Lisburn | ■ St John's Primary School, Gilford |
| ■ Hart Memorial Primary School, Portadown | ■ St Patrick's Primary School, Newry |
| ■ Holy Trinity Primary School, Cookstown | ■ St Peter's Primary School, Cookstown |
| ■ Jones Memorial Primary School, Enniskillen | ■ St Ronan's Primary School, Lisnaskea |
| ■ Kilbride Primary School, Doagh | ■ Strandtown Primary School, Belfast |
| ■ Kilbroney Controlled Integrated Primary School, Rostrevor | ■ Tandragee Primary School |
| ■ Kircubbin Controlled Integrated Primary School | |
| ■ Ligoniel Primary School, Belfast | |

Whitehead Primary School Post-Primary Schools (31 schools)

- Ashfield Boys' High School, Belfast
 - Abbey Christian Brothers' School, Newry
 - Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School, Belfast
 - Ballyclare High School
 - Ballyclare Secondary School
 - Ballymena Academy
 - Ballymoney High School
 - Belfast Royal Academy
 - Cambridge House Grammar School, Ballymena
 - Carrickfergus Grammar School
 - Clounagh Junior High School, Portadown
 - Craigavon Senior High School, Portadown
 - Dalriada School, Ballymoney
 - Edmund Rice College Newtownabbey
 - Friends School, Lisburn
 - Hunterhouse Grammar School, Belfast
 - Limavady Grammar School
 - Limavady High School
 - Loreto College Coleraine
 - Lumen Christi College Londonderry
 - Our Lady's Grammar School, Newry
 - Rainey Endowed Magherafelt
 - Regent House Grammar School, Newtownards
 - Sacred Heart Grammar School, Newry
 - St Brigid's College, Londonderry
 - St Catherine's College, Armagh
 - St Columb's College, Londonderry
 - St Michael's Grammar School, Enniskillen
 - St Pius X College, Magherafelt
 - The Royal School, Armagh
- Wallace High School, Lisburn Special Schools (4 schools)**
- Arvalee Special School, Omagh
 - Clifton Special School, Bangor
 - Hillcroft School, Newtownabbey
 - Willowbridge Special School, Enniskillen

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) the criteria used to select schools for School Enhancement Programme funding; and (ii) the amount of funding awarded to each school.
(AQW 388/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) All applications to the second call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2) were assessed using the criteria in the published protocol (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enhancement-programme-second-call-protocol-selection>). Those schools not filtered out as part of the Gateway process outlined in the protocol, were scored and three prioritised lists of projects were produced - one for primary schools, one for post-primary schools and one for special schools. These prioritised lists will remain live until 8 May 2020.
- (ii) Departmental officials are currently working with those schools announced to advance in planning to agree the scope of the projects. Detailed plans for each school will be developed throughout the planning and design process. It is not possible to be definitive about the likely spend on any individual project until the scoping/technical feasibility work is complete however SEP projects typically result in investment of between £2.5 and £4m.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education for an update on a pay award for teachers.
(AQW 399/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education is not the employer of teachers. The Teachers' Negotiating Committee is the recognised negotiating machinery for teachers' terms and conditions, including pay; represented on the trade union side by the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council, which encompasses the five main teachers' unions and on Management Side, by the main managing authorities, particularly the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, sectoral interests and the Department.

Management and Trade Union Sides of the Teachers' Negotiating Committee reached an agreement in principle in June 2019 which has the potential to resolve the teachers' pay dispute. A formal offer cannot be made yet to teachers' unions because of the requirement for Department of Finance approval and funding cover. A case for funding has already been made to the Department of Finance which covers initial funding as well as the additional impact on baseline resources. Allocation of funding is still under consideration and I am urgently progressing this in order to implement a teachers' pay award for 2017-18 and 2018-19.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build project for Holy Trinity College, Cookstown.
(AQW 400/17-22)

Mr Weir: Holy Trinity College was announced to advance in planning in January 2013. An Integrated Consultant Team (ICT) was appointed in May 2017 following approval of the business case which identified a new build on the current site as the preferred option.

A RIBA Stage 2 report – Concept Design – was approved in March 2019 and the planning application was submitted in May 2019; a response is anticipated early in 2020.

The first stage of procurement for the Integrated Supply Team is underway with returns currently being moderated.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) what measures are in place; and (ii) what work has been implemented to tackle loneliness.

(AQW 414/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has no specific measures in place to address loneliness in children and young people in schools.

DE is however working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and the Education Authority to develop a Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework, which will build on DE's existing iMatter Programme, to promote emotional wellbeing within schools. This will further support schools to develop a "whole school wellbeing" culture and ethos, including a sense of connectedness and belonging for all pupils.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the current vacant school sites in the Lagan Valley constituency; and (ii) their future use.

(AQW 427/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education (DE) does not own property; responsibility for property is dependent on the type of school.

The Education Authority (EA) is responsible for schools in the controlled sector. The EA has provided details below of schools which fall into their remit and the current position regarding future usage.

Voluntary Grammar, Maintained and Grant Maintained Integrated schools are owned and managed by the school's Trustees. On closure responsibility for these assets reverts solely to the Trustees. My Department may seek grant recovery from the Trustees as per the Voluntary Schools Building Grant Regulations (NI) 1993.

Vacant School Sites in Lagan Valley Constituency Under EA Control

Name	Town	Type	Status	Comments
Old Dromore Primary School	Dromore	Primary	Closed	Internal trawl to seek alternative use.
Ravernette Primary School	Lisburn	Primary	Closed	Title difficulties
Derriaghy Primary School	Lisburn	Primary	Closed	Sale Under negotiation
Old Brookfield School	Moira	Special	Closed	Title difficulties
Knockbreda High School	Wynchurch Road, Belfast	Secondary	Closed	Held for future development of Primary provision

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the development of his Department's emotional and wellbeing framework and to outline a timeframe for its implementation.

(AQW 438/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and the Education Authority, to develop a Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework that will aim to enhance support for children and young people. The emphasis will be on promotion, prevention and early intervention, including how services can be augmented to support schools, and their pupils.

The Framework is still under development and the timeframe for implementation will be subject to additional resources being made available.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) how much additional funding will be made available to schools, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach; and (ii) if this will be in place for school budgets from September 2020.

(AQW 439/17-22)

Mr Weir: Commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement can only be delivered with additional funding. Negotiations on the associated financial package continue, the outcome of which is still unknown. Therefore budgets beyond the current financial year remain undetermined.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) when he will initiate the review of Education, (ii) how he will recruit for the independent panel to complete the review and; (iii) how he will provide appropriate funding to ensure the review is able to independently examine the best way to deliver a fit for purpose education system that is affordable, effective, efficient and sustainable.

(AQW 464/17-22)

Mr Weir: I will give consideration to the design and delivery of the Independent Review of Education provision as articulated in New Decade, New Approach.

It would, thereafter, be my intention to bring forward proposals to the Executive which would include detail on the timing of such a review, the methodology for recruiting an appropriate panel and the funding ramifications.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education when the Education Authority will provide home to school transport for pupils attending St John the Baptist's College, Portadown, which will mean pupils from Maghery not having to wait on a bus home until 4.45pm.

(AQW 471/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have been advised by the Education Authority that it is currently providing home to school transport for 22 pupils, attending St John the Baptist's College, Portadown.

The Authority accepts that, whilst it is meeting its statutory obligations under the home to school transport policy, the afternoon arrangements are at the extreme of what is acceptable for those children travelling home from St John the Baptist's College, Portadown, to Maghery by Ulsterbus.

The Authority is working with Translink in reviewing existing schedules and routes operated by the EA and Translink in order to develop and put in place a solution at the earliest opportunity.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to outline what invest to save opportunities exist within his Department.

(AQW 488/17-22)

Mr Weir: The following invest to save opportunities currently exist within the Department.

Voluntary Exit Schemes (VES)

During 2019-20, the Department received funding for Voluntary Exit Schemes for Teaching and Non-Teaching staff within the education sector. The primary aim of these schemes is to assist schools and arm's length bodies to reduce their cost base through a reduction in full-time equivalent staffing numbers.

Education Transformation Programme

The Education Transformation Programme is considering how the education system could be reformed to ensure it is sustainable, effective and efficient - with positive outcomes for children and young people. While elements of the Programme may result in recommendations relating to invest to save measures, it is too early to say at this stage.

As agreed in the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement, it is proposed that there will be an Independent Review of Education Provision. I will give due consideration to the design and delivery of this, including such issues as how the Review will interact with existing Departmental work and the Transformation Programme.

Capital

There are several areas within the schools' estate where capital investment can lead to savings, such as:

- the provision of water and energy monitors;
- the upgrading to LED lighting;
- the replacement of windows to reduce heat loss;
- the replacement of aging heating systems; and
- the installation of solar panels.

Area Planning

While the Sustainable Schools Policy is an educational and not a financial policy, it requires investment in Area Planning to further the aim of developing a network of educationally and financially viable schools across Northern Ireland in order that all children have access to a broad and balanced curriculum. To effect real change, both resource and capital funding would be required. Having the right number of schools, of the right size, in the right location, will allow the maximisation of educational resources.

It is also important to recognise that all of the work of the Department is aimed at providing children and young people with the best start in life. There are therefore many work streams, projects, initiatives and interventions that, while not specifically identified as invest to save opportunities, are targeted at achieving better outcomes for society in the future.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's plans for vacant school sites in the Omagh area, which is set to increase when schools relocate to the Strule Shared Education Campus.

(AQW 537/17-22)

Mr Weir: There will be five post-primary schools relocating to Strule Shared Education Campus (SSEC), upon completion. Two of these sites are owned by the Education Authority (EA) and three are owned by individual Trustee organisations. It is for these site owners to decide on the future use and/or disposal of their respective sites.

The Department, however, in recognition of the significance of the vacated school sites to Omagh town, established the Vacated Sites Working Group in November 2016. The working group comprises members representing site owners, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, and representation from relevant government departments.

The Working Group is actively considering how best to plan for and manage the future use and/or disposal of the existing school sites and site specific disposal strategies have been prepared as a first step in determining plans for their future use. These plans will be further developed as we advance towards the sites becoming vacant and will be developed in line with and feed into the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council Local Development Plan.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to change the designation of Beechlawn School, Lisburn, to a Special School.
(AQW 551/17-22)

Mr Weir: Beechlawn School is currently designated as a Special School, offering specialist provision for post-primary age pupils.

The Education Authority's extended Annual Action Plan April 2019-March 2021 (the Action Plan) sets out the work programme of the planning and managing authorities to address specific issues at a local level.

The Action Plan describes a key issue for Beechlawn Special School as "Reconfigure 3-19 provision within a common structure" with the following specified action: "Managing Authority to consult on changing provision to include pupils ages 3-19 and those with more significant and/or complex needs by September 2020".

The Education Authority, as planning authority for special education provision, is examining the scope for bringing forward a series of Development Proposals (DPs) that will reconfigure this type of provision on an area basis. My Department will formally become engaged as and when DPs are published.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to identify land, owned by his Department, that is suitable for the planting of trees, given that Northern Ireland is the second most deforested part of Europe.
(AQW 572/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department generally does not own land within the schools estate. The land associated with controlled schools is normally owned by the Education Authority (EA), while Voluntary Grammar, Maintained and Grant Maintained Integrated schools are owned and managed by the school's Trustees.

Notwithstanding the above, my Department is represented on the cross-departmental Future Generations Group, which seeks to address the causes of climate change and to mitigate its impact. Through this role, my Department will consider any opportunities identified for tree planting on school land.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education for a progress report on the announced new builds for Lismore Comprehensive School, Craigavon and St Ronan's Grammar School, Lurgan.
(AQW 584/17-22)

Mr Weir: The current position on these projects is as follows:

Lismore Comprehensive School, Craigavon

A business case addendum and the RIBA Stage 3 (Developed Design) were approved by the Department on 16 January 2020. Planning approval is in place for this project and the procurement of the Develop & Build Integrated Supply Team will commence in the coming weeks.

St Ronan's College, Lurgan

The RIBA Stage 3 (Developed Design) for this project is approved and it is expected that the procurement of the Develop & Build Integrated Supply Team will commence in the coming weeks.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to change the designation of St John the Baptist's College, Portadown, to a 11-19 school.
(AQW 599/17-22)

Mr Weir: A Development Proposal for the re-designation of St John the Baptist's College, Portadown to an 11-19 school is currently at pre-publication consultation stage.

The Education Authority is presently consulting with schools most likely to be affected by the proposal, to seek their views, before the proposal will be published.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on the 14 to 19 policy review.
(AQW 600/17-22)

Mr Weir: The "Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project" was established in January 2019 as a jointly led and funded Department of Education and Department for the Economy project.

The Project has identified a number of work streams and is currently working to establish the baseline position, build an evidence base and identify the key challenges associated with the 14-19 landscape.

A range of stakeholder engagement activities with the purpose of identifying challenges and building an evidence base to support the development of a draft 14-19 Strategy are underway with a range of stakeholder groups.

I look forward to working with the Minister for the Economy in progressing the development of a draft 14-19 strategy in the coming months.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has any plans to announce a fourth tranche of School Enhancement Programme funding before May 2020.

(AQW 601/17-22)

Mr Weir: My statement to the Assembly on 14 January 2020 represented the third tranche of projects to be announced from the Second Call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2). The prioritised lists from this call will remain live to May 2020 and there is therefore the potential for a further, final announcement before the lists expire.

As part of the Department's overall capital investment strategy, I will then consider if there should be a third call for applications to SEP.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of children who have had their details passed to a third party in the United Kingdom by the Department for Education's Learning Record Service; and (ii) the types of information that has been passed to gambling companies.

(AQW 607/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is the Department's understanding that no actual student data has been passed to any third party by the Learning Record Service (LRS) in England other than to confirm or deny whether there is a student record for an individual on the database.

A training organisation in England which had legitimate access to the LRS database used this access to facilitate the verification of details of individuals provided to them by a third party. This was in breach of their agreement and the contract with that provider has now been terminated.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has any plans to standardise comprehensive and inclusive relationships and sex education (RSE).

(AQW 632/17-22)

Mr Weir: RSE is currently covered within the statutory Northern Ireland curriculum under the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (primary) and the Learning for Life and Work (post-primary) Areas of Learning. This provides a standardised statutory minimum entitlement, which all children must legally receive.

Beyond the statutory minimum content, schools and teachers have the flexibility to decide the topics and approaches that best suit their pupils. Providing detailed lists of compulsory subject content within a curriculum does not in any way guarantee that a subject will be well or appropriately taught. Further, in an area such as RSE, prescribed content may rapidly become out of date or new issues may emerge. I do not, therefore, intend to introduce greater legal prescription and standardisation in the RSE Curriculum at present.

Rather during the past number of years, my Department has provided earmarked funding of to CCEA to support the production of RSE resources and guidance materials, particularly on a range of sensitive topics. In June 2019, CCEA launched a new online RSE Hub to facilitate easy access to these resources. This approach is aimed at enhancing the teaching of RSE in schools through providing teachers with resources and support to increase their competence and confidence in this area. The focus in 2019/20 is the development of a Curricular Progression Framework which will clearly set out for schools key issues to be considered at each Key Stage. Further funding to support this work will be provided in 2020/21. Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has in place to address mental health issues in primary and post-primary schools.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has in place to address mental health issues in primary and post-primary schools.

(AQW 674/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and the Education Authority, to develop a Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework through a model of promotion, prevention and early intervention.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to bring forward legislation to allow parents to defer their child's date of admission to compulsory education, following the outcome of the public consultation of 2014/15.

(AQW 686/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is clear that a number parents, particularly those of summer born children or those born prematurely, feel strongly that it would be in their child's best interests not to start school at four years of age. However, I have not come to a view on whether legislative change is the most appropriate approach. Whilst a significant amount of research has been carried out on the issue of whether a later start for summer born or premature children contributes to improved outcomes for children, there is no clear academic consensus and evidence is available on both sides of the debate.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will fund access to free sanitary products in schools.
(AQW 689/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education (DE) is the policy lead in this area in respect of schools however “period-poverty” is a cross-cutting issue therefore decisions regarding funding are for the NI Executive to consider.

I am aware of developments in England, Wales and Scotland to provide sanitary products free of charge through a range of bodies and approaches. Provision for all schools in Northern Ireland would be dependent on funding and my officials are considering options in this regard. The Department has also been seeking the views of officials in the Department for Communities, Department of Health, Department for the Economy and Department of Justice on this matter.

Over the past year, my Department has been working with the Education Authority to put in place a small pilot in North Belfast involving eight schools. With help from the charity Red Box, free sanitary products have been provided, to each participating school, with replenishment dependent on donations.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether he will address the issue of period poverty amongst students by making sanitary products freely available in schools.
(AQW 735/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education (DE) is the policy lead in this area in respect of schools however “period-poverty” is a cross-cutting issue therefore decisions regarding funding are for the NI Executive to consider.

I am aware of developments in England, Wales and Scotland to provide sanitary products free of charge through a range of bodies and approaches. Provision for all schools in Northern Ireland would be dependent on funding and my officials are considering options in this regard. The Department has also been seeking the views of officials in the Department for Communities, Department of Health, Department for the Economy and Department of Justice on this matter.

Over the past year, my Department has been working with the Education Authority to put in place a small pilot in North Belfast involving eight schools. With help from the charity Red Box, free sanitary products have been provided, to each participating school, with replenishment dependent on donations.

Funding for Nurture Group Provision

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Education whether he has plans to extend funding for nurture group provision.
(AQW 737/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department currently provides funding for 31 Nurture Groups. In my previous tenure as Education Minister, I gave a commitment that the Department would continue to fund these particular groups until a decision on a new Nurture Programme was made. This remains the position and I will be considering this matter in due course, including the option of extending provision.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to detail the latest GCSE attainment level figures, broken down by (i) community background; and (ii) gender.
(AQW 813/17-22)

Mr Weir: Information on the attainment of school leavers in 2018/19 will be available in May 2020.

Tables 1 and 2 below detail the number and percentage of school leavers in 2017/18 achieving; At least 5 GCSEs at A*-C; At least 5 GCSEs at A*-C including English and maths; At least 5 GCSEs at A*-G; and No GCSEs, broken down by; (i) community background; and (ii) gender.

Table 1: Qualifications of school leavers by religion of pupil 2017/2018⁽¹⁾

Protestant	Numbers	%
At least 5 GCSEs A*-C ⁽²⁾	6982	85.4
At least 5 GCSEs A*-C ⁽²⁾ inc English and maths	5700	69.7
At least 5 GCSEs A*-G ⁽²⁾	7951	97.2
No GCSEs ⁽³⁾	58	0.7
Total Protestant	8177	100.0

Catholic	Numbers	%
At least 5 GCSEs A*-C ⁽²⁾	9468	85.3
At least 5 GCSEs A*-C ⁽²⁾ inc English and maths	7923	71.4
At least 5 GCSEs A*-G ⁽²⁾	10672	96.2

No GCSEs ⁽³⁾	87	0.8
Total Catholic	11094	100.0

Other⁽⁴⁾	Numbers	%
At least 5 GCSEs A*-C ⁽²⁾	1924	84.0
At least 5 GCSEs A*-C ⁽²⁾ inc English and maths	1604	70.0
At least 5 GCSEs A*-G ⁽²⁾	2210	96.5
No GCSEs ⁽³⁾	19	0.8
Total Other	2291	100.0

Source: School Leavers survey

Notes

- 1 Excludes special and independent schools
- 2 Includes equivalent qualifications
- 3 Includes those who undertook no GCSE examinations or obtained no graded results but who obtained other qualifications
- 4 Other includes Other Christian, No religion and Non-Christian.

Table 2: Qualifications of school leavers by gender 2017/2018(1)

	Boys		Girls		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
At least 5 GCSEs A*-C(2)	9109	81.5	9265	89.2	18374	85.2
At least 5 GCSEs A*-C(2) inc English and maths	7381	66.0	7846	75.6	15227	70.6
At least 5 GCSEs A*-G(2)	10721	95.9	10112	97.4	20833	96.6
No GCSEs(3)	101	0.9	63	0.6	164	0.8
Total Leavers	11181	100.0	10381	100.0	21562	100.0

Source: School Leavers survey

Notes

- 1 Excludes special and independent schools
- 2 Includes equivalent qualifications
- 3 Includes those who undertook no GCSE examinations or obtained no graded results but who obtained other qualifications

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what steps can he take to provide support to ensure the future of the Risk Avoidance and Danger Awareness Resource Centre (Radar).
(AQW 841/17-22)

Mr Weir: I acknowledge the value of RADAR but, given the difficult position of the education budget, I am not in a position to consider or commit funding at this time.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Education to outline whether he intends to implement a consistent approach to the teaching of Relationships and Sex Education in all schools.
(AQW 852/17-22)

Mr Weir: RSE is currently covered within the statutory Northern Ireland curriculum under the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (primary) and the Learning for Life and Work (post-primary) Areas of Learning. This provides a standardised statutory minimum entitlement, which all children must legally receive.

Beyond the statutory minimum content, schools and teachers have the flexibility to decide the topics and approaches that best suit their pupils. Providing detailed lists of compulsory subject content within a curriculum does not in any way guarantee that a subject will be well or appropriately taught. Further, in an area such as RSE, prescribed content may rapidly become

out of date or new issues may emerge. I do not, therefore, intend to introduce greater legal prescription and standardisation in the RSE Curriculum at present.

Rather during the past number of years, my Department has provided earmarked funding of to CCEA to support the production of RSE resources and guidance materials, particularly on a range of sensitive topics. In June 2019, CCEA launched a new online RSE Hub to facilitate easy access to these resources. This approach is aimed at enhancing the teaching of RSE in schools through providing teachers with resources and support to increase their competence and confidence in this area. The focus in 2019/20 is the development of a Curricular Progression Framework which will clearly set out for schools' key issues to be considered at each Key Stage. Further funding to support this work will be provided in 2020/21.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education to outline the required criteria for children to qualify for Exceptional Teaching Arrangements.
(AQW 858/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have been advised by the Education Authority (EA) that a pupil may access Exceptional Teaching Arrangements (ETA) when they are clinically assessed as unwell and are likely to be absent from school for a period of no less than 20 days. The application for ETA must follow one of the pathways listed below:

Pathway	Supporting Evidence
Weight bearing short-term injuries which are unlikely to require further medical referrals and where the school is unable to make reasonable adjustment.	A signed letter from a GP confirming the nature of the injury.
Complex medical needs where the pupil is under the care of a medical consultant.	A signed report from the medical consultant outlining anticipated impact on school attendance
Pupils who are clinically assessed as unable to attend school due to mental health reasons (normally Step 3 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Stepped Care Model)	A signed letter from a clinical consultant/team lead outlining anticipated impact on school attendance
School Age Mother	A referral from Education Welfare (EWS)/School Aged Mothers (SAMs) Co-ordinator

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education whether he will introduce free sanitary products in schools.
(AQW 873/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education (DE) is the policy lead in this area in respect of schools however "period-poverty" is a cross-cutting issue therefore decisions regarding funding are for the NI Executive to consider.

I am aware of developments in England, Wales and Scotland to provide sanitary products free of charge through a range of bodies and approaches. Provision for all schools in Northern Ireland would be dependent on funding and my officials are considering options in this regard. The Department has also been seeking the views of officials in the Department for Communities, Department of Health, Department for the Economy and Department of Justice on this matter.

Over the past year, my Department has been working with the Education Authority to put in place a small pilot in North Belfast involving eight schools. With help from the charity Red Box, free sanitary products have been provided, to each participating school, with replenishment dependent on donations.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether she will review, in consultation with the UK's Minister for Education, the rules around the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (Further Education) PGCE (FE), in order to allow those with this qualification who teach vocational courses for adults outside of compulsory education age to register with the General Teaching Council.
(AQW 947/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are currently no plans to review the rules around the PGCE(FE). The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, which was established under the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, is the professional registration body for teachers in Northern Ireland and as such is responsible for the registration of persons wishing to teach in grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland. It has no responsibility for registration of Further Education lecturers.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether it is appropriate for any school not to publish entrance criteria.
(AQW 1014/17-22)

Mr Weir: All grant-aided schools must have admissions criteria in place to ensure the Board of Governors can select pupils for admission to the school if it is oversubscribed with applications. Article 16 of The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 sets out this requirement. These criteria must be capable of distinguishing between applicants to the last available place.

Article 17 of the same Order sets out the requirement for the Education Authority (EA) to publish these admissions criteria. To this end schools must submit their admissions criteria to the EA each autumn for admissions the following September.

Department of Finance

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what is the anticipated additional budget requirements resulting from (i) the language proposals; and (ii) any other proposals relevant to the exercise of its functions in New Decade, New Approach. (AQW 237/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): My officials are currently determining the scope and delivery model for the Translation Hub and the impact of other proposals within the New Decade, New Approach Document on my Department. As soon as this work is concluded I will be in a position to provide an estimate of budget requirements.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what is the anticipated additional staffing requirements resulting from (i) the language proposals; and (ii) any other proposals relevant to the exercise of its functions in New Decade, New Approach. (AQW 239/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials are currently determining the scope and delivery model for the Translation Hub and the impact of other proposals within the New Decade, New Approach Document on my Department. As soon as this work is concluded I will be in a position to provide an estimate of staffing requirements.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Finance what action he will take to address the issues surrounding the real term decrease in Civil Service pay. (AQW 371/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NICS pay awards in the past decade were determined in a challenging financial environment. The non-ring fenced Resource DEL block grant has reduced in real terms by £530 million from 2010-11. Affordability continues to be an important consideration in negotiating a pay award for 2019/20. I met with officials from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance on 22 January. I will be working closely with Departmental officials to progress and resolve the NICS 2019/20 pay award for all Civil Service staff as soon as possible.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Finance whether Barnett Consequential relating to the recruitment of police officers will be ring-fenced for the Department of Justice. (AQW 374/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Barnett consequentials are unhypothecated, meaning that they are not ring-fenced for a specific purpose. It will be for the Executive to decide how to allocate additional funding, in line with local needs and priorities.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance (i) for his assessment of the working environment in the Northern Ireland Prison Service and; (ii) how he plans to support personnel through Civil Service sickness policies if sickness absence is work related. (AQW 377/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Whilst the Prison Service falls under Department of Justice all the Civil Service staff working there, including prison officers, are supported by the civil service sickness absence policies as follows. Staff can self-refer to Inspire, the civil service counselling service, and or obtain assistance from the Welfare Service and the Occupational Health Service. Also, all prison establishments still retain on site HR teams to provide face to face service for all staff. Furthermore, an additional professional support service operated by the Police Rehabilitation & Retraining Trust was introduced in the summer of 2017 for those operational staff who are suffering from mental health issues or who require physiotherapy treatment.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to meet with industrial and non-industrial unions to discuss (i) their claim for an above-inflation pay increase on both pay and allowances; (ii) pay restoration to address the pay loss since 2010 and; (iii) further scale shortening for all grades from AA to Grade 6. (AQW 378/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NICS pay awards in the past decade were determined in a challenging financial environment. The non-ring fenced Resource DEL block grant has reduced in real terms by £530 million from 2010-11. Affordability continues to be an important consideration in negotiating a pay award for 2019/20. I met with officials from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance on 22 January. A meeting has not yet been requested by or arranged with the industrial trades unions. I will be working closely with Departmental officials to progress and resolve the NICS 2019/20 pay award for all Civil Service staff as soon as possible.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance to detail any unspent monies, both (i) capital; and (ii) resource, sent back to the Treasury by each Department, broken down by the last three financial years. (AQW 380/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I can confirm that no departmental underspends in the last three years in non ring-fenced Resource DEL or Capital DEL have been returned. 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 in each of the last 3 years are shown in the table below.

A significant amount of Financial Transactions Capital funding has been returned. This represents unused funding as opposed to departmental underspends. The amounts in each of the last 3 years are shown in the table below.

£million	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Ring-fenced Resource DEL	96.5	100.7	83.0
Financial Transactions Capital	34.5	109.4	171.9

Going forward, 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.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance (i) what measures are in place; and (ii) what work has been implemented to tackle loneliness.

(AQW 412/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Responsibility for the Active Ageing Strategy, which identified this issue as significant for older people is the responsibility of the Department for Communities since the departmental reorganisation in 2016.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the timeframe for tabling the outcome of the recent Review of the Non-Domestic Rating System.

(AQW 447/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The public consultation closed in late November and my officials have been examining the extensive range of responses received and are developing findings into short, medium and long term policy objectives.

I will meet officials in the near future to discuss this work and explore the policy options that may be available to me.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the overall increase in the Draft Schedule of Values as a result of Non-Domestic Rates Revaluation 2020 for the Ards and North Down Borough Council area.

(AQW 449/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In the Ards and North Down Borough Council area the total Net Annual Value in the Draft Schedule of Values has increased by £5.9 million from £94.9 million to £100.8 million, an increase of 6.2%. The table shows the growth for each Council area.

Council	Total NAV £m Current Valuation List	Total NAV £m Draft Schedule	Growth
Antrim & Newtownabbey	£123.4	£132.1	7.0%
Ards & North Down	£94.9	£100.8	6.2%
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	£134.3	£141.5	5.4%
Belfast	£478.5	£520.7	8.8%
Causeway Coast & Glens	£87.9	£94.7	7.6%
Derry City & Strabane	£117.7	£126.0	7.0%
Fermanagh & Omagh	£98.9	£102.7	3.9%
Lisburn & Castlereagh	£120.5	£126.4	4.9%
Mid & East Antrim	£97.5	£98.4	0.9%
Mid Ulster	£93.3	£101.8	9.1%
Newry, Mourne & Down	£111.9	£119.5	6.7%
Northern Ireland	£1,559	£1,665	6.8%

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department will (i) update building regulations to ensure that changing places toilets are required as standard in every new public building; and (ii) update the policy so that all public and government buildings will retrofit changing places toilets within the next 5 years.

(AQW 463/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department is aware of and sympathetic to the dignity issues and impacts arising from the limited provision of changing places toilets (CPT). It will continue to support and encourage appropriate legislative changes to achieve a more equitable environment for all, with fully accessible facilities appropriately distributed in public places across the region.

Specifically:

The Department is engaging with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the other devolved administrations in relation to including requirements for the provision for changing places toilets in our building regulations.

The Department has responsibility for managing those buildings within the central government office estate. The Department plans to complete a CPT installation later this year on the Stormont Estate that will be fully accessible to the public. We will continue to consider future further instalments of CPTs on our office estate, learning from this important project.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance to detail the total savings that have accrued to the trustees of Orange Halls since the introduction of rates relief for the majority of these buildings.

(AQW 469/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Since the introduction in April 2006 of Article 41A of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland has received rates support of £12.16 million (as at 19th January 2020).

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance to outline his plans to reform the non-domestic rating system.

(AQW 490/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In December 2016, my predecessor Máirtín Ó Muilleoir launched a consultation entitled 'Rates: Rethink' to consider business and domestic rates reform. Subsequently, in May 2019, my Department launched a comprehensive review of business rates in recognition of the changes to high streets and town centres, and the need to ensure that the business rating system is fit for purpose. The public consultation closed in late November and my officials have been examining the extensive range of responses received and are developing findings into short, medium and long term policy objectives. I will meet officials in the near future to explore the wide range of policy options that may be available to me. I am committed to creating a rating system that is fair and fit for purpose, allows businesses to grow and prosper and, importantly, raises the money we need for good public services.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance what action he will take to ensure fair pay for Civil Servants.

(AQW 498/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NICS pay awards in the past decade were determined in a challenging financial environment. The non-ring fenced Resource DEL block grant has reduced in real terms by £530 million from 2010-11. Affordability continues to be an important consideration in negotiating a pay award for 2019/20. I met with officials from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance on 22 January. I will be working closely with Departmental officials to progress and resolve the NICS 2019/20 pay award for all Civil Service staff as soon as possible.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance what measures he is taking to address issues in relation to Civil Service pay.

(AQW 499/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NICS pay awards in the past decade were determined in a challenging financial environment. The non-ring fenced Resource DEL block grant has reduced in real terms by £530 million from 2010-11. Affordability continues to be an important consideration in negotiating a pay award for 2019/20. I met with officials from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, on 22 January. I will be working closely with Departmental officials to progress and resolve the NICS 2019/20 pay award for all Civil Service staff as soon as possible.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance to outline his plans and processes to align the budget with Programme for Government outcomes, including relevant timelines.

(AQW 510/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive must put in place a Budget for 2020-21 before the start of the financial year on 1 April. In doing so we will take account of the Executive's agreed priorities for the year ensuring that the Budget continues to support the delivery of Programme for Government outcomes.

Looking forward, it is the intention to develop a multi-year Programme for Government and Budget in tandem for the period from 2021-22 onwards.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Finance in the face of the climate change emergency, to outline what actions or policies his Department will (i) take; or (ii) adopt, (a) immediately; (b) in the short term; and (c) in the longer term to help reduce carbon emissions.

(AQW 550/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance ('the Department') has a number of actions and policies that are and will contribute to reductions in carbon emissions.

The Department provides shared service functions across the Civil Service, including digital and IT services and manages the central government office estate. Along with partner organisations BSO, Translink, NI Water and EA, the Department operates shared Data Centre facilities which have resulted in a typical reduction of 585,000kg of CO₂ per annum compared with previous Data Centre arrangements. This arrangement will also be taken forward with other providers of shared services to the Public Sector, to ensure that all can achieve the benefits identified. The Department is also planning to move more of its ICT services to Public Cloud providers.

Implementation of the Civil Service Print Strategy in 2017 has seen the replacement of over 7000 printers with 1200 energy efficient Multi-Function Devices, and a reduction in NICS print volumes of 70 million pages per year. Printing continues to be a source for further reductions and steps are being taken to remove up to 2000 remaining printers.

All desktops and laptops used by staff across the NICS are 'Energy Star 6' compliant. Energy Star is an EU standard for energy efficiency, established to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants caused by the inefficient use of energy. All public sector organisations can make use of the contract and gain similar benefits.

The central government office estate is estimated to account for around 4% of the energy consumption of the local public sector and our current three year Energy Efficiency Carbon Reduction Plan for the office estate aims to reduce energy consumption by 5% by 2021. This is the third three year plan and will contribute to the 'Energy Management Strategy and Action Plan', recently published by the Department for the Economy and the Strategic Investment Board; this aims to lower central government net energy consumption by 30% by 2030. The Department is also reducing our office space "footprint", as well as promoting flexible working and working environments. This along with the increased use of electronic meetings and video conferencing will reduce the need for travel.

The Department provides construction and procurement guidance to departments. In the delivery of public infrastructure projects, it implements the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) targets. BREEAM targets are designed to mitigate the environmental impact of projects by reducing CO₂ emissions, waste and pollution; conserving water and land use; promoting public transport and sustainable materials; and considering the health and wellbeing of people that come into contact with the developments.

The Department has policy and legislation responsibility for Building Regulations, which set minimum standards for building work. We liaise with colleagues and monitor work in other jurisdictions, particularly in relation to energy efficiency, ventilation, moisture and wind loads, with a view to bringing forward uplifts to our local building regulations, to adapt to climate change impacts and to lower future carbon emissions from buildings. Subject to the usual policy development processes and appropriate consultation, the Department plans to bring forward suitable, significant uplifts to energy efficiency standards within our building regulations, with a view to ongoing further uplifts.

The Department legislates for Energy Performance Certificates and air-conditioning inspections in buildings and plans to introduce amendments to continue to implement the requirements of the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive and to provide prospective tenants and purchasers of buildings with information on the relevant energy and carbon performance of buildings.

The Department is collaborating with and will feed into the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs' 'Future Generations' work on Climate Change. This work will take account of the advice from the Climate Change Committee in the "Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland" report. My officials will have full regard to this and commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' in future policy, legislation and administrative work.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance what measures he will take to ensure pay disputes between Civil Service employees and their employer will be resolved.

(AQW 650/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I met with officials from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, who represent non-industrial civil servants, on 22 January. It was a constructive discussion. I appreciate the work Civil Servants do in supporting and delivering a wide range of public services and am committed to continued engagement with trade union colleagues. I will be working closely with Departmental officials to progress and resolve the NICS 2019/20 pay award for all Civil Service staff as soon as possible.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his Department's plans for a social value act.

(AQW 656/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Like me, I know that you are a strong supporter of a social value act. The Procurement Board is working with the social economy sector to explore options to widen social value through further development of procurement policy. This work will be important as we develop proposals for social value legislation which I intend to bring to Executive Colleagues as soon as possible.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to identify land, owned by his Department, that is suitable for the planting of trees, given that Northern Ireland is the second most deforested part of Europe.

(AQW 658/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am fully supportive of any appropriate initiative that would increase the planting and coverage of trees across the island. Land assets held by my Department, however, are limited to those associated with the central government office estate which is predominantly located in urban environments with little ground suitable for planting trees.

One of the few exceptions is the Stormont Estate, the management of which falls to my Department. The Estate is widely recognised as an excellent example of urban parkland with approximately 69 of its 165 hectares under woodland or tree cover (42%). The Estate's Woodland Management Plan sets out operations planned over a fifteen year period, including a programme of maintenance and regeneration of the tree cover to encourage the natural regeneration of tree species and allow a new generation to thrive.

My department has also started a project to create a single map and database of all publicly owned land and property here. When completed, this project will greatly simplify the process of identifying land which might be suitable for a wide variety of possible uses.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance to outline his plans for Civil Service pay.

(AQW 663/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I met with officials from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, who represent non-industrial civil servants, on 22 January. It was a constructive discussion. I appreciate the work Civil Servants do in supporting and delivering a wide range of public services and am committed to continued engagement with trade union colleagues. I will be working closely with Departmental officials to progress and resolve the NICS 2019/20 pay award for all Civil Service staff as soon as possible.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance how much of the income generated by the Aggregates Levy has been spent on environmental projects.

(AQW 664/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Revenues from the Aggregates Levy are collected by the British Government via HMRC and the North of Ireland does not receive any ring-fenced funding from Aggregates Levy revenues for environmental projects.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance to outline the total amount paid by the sand and quarrying industry as a result of the Aggregates Levy since the introduction of this tax.

(AQW 665/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Revenues from the Aggregates Levy are collected by the British Government via HMRC and the North of Ireland does not receive any ring-fenced funding from Aggregates Levy revenues for environmental projects.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Finance to outline the process and timeframe by which his Department will undertake a review of quangos and arm's-length bodies, as contained in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 727/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Proposals for the implementation of the commitments and actions in the New Decade, New Approach Agreement will be brought forward by relevant Ministers in due course.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Finance whether any of the £2 billion from the UK Government to the Executive is ring-fenced for specific Departments or projects; and if so, to provide the relevant details.

(AQW 775/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Of the £2 billion proposed:

- £1 billion is future Barnett consequential which would be received regardless of New Decade, New Approach.
- £200 million is ring-fenced for the Agenda for Change pay dispute;
- £15 million is ring-fenced to help deliver a Graduate Entry Medical School in Magee, subject to Executive approval;
- £50 million is ring-fenced to support the rollout of ultra-low emission public transport;
- £245 million is ring-fenced to support the transformation of public services; and
- £140 million is ring-fenced for unique circumstances.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Finance whether any Barnett consequential funds will be ring-fenced for a Department when the funds being received are as a result of work carried out by an equivalent UK department; and if so, to provide the relevant details.

(AQW 776/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Funds received as Barnett Consequential are not ring-fenced. It will be for the Executive to decide how to allocate consequential in line with local needs and priorities.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Finance over what period of time the £2 billion funding package from the UK Government is to be spent.

(AQW 778/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The timeframe for the full funding package is still to be clarified, however the Northern Ireland Office published details of the timeframe for some elements of the funding package. These details can be accessed via the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-commits-2bn-to-support-new-northern-ireland-executive>

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance to detail the cost of introducing a two-year cap on claims for backdated holiday pay for civil servants.

(AQW 815/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Introduction of a two-year cap on backdated holiday pay claims from civil servants would require agreement by the Executive and legislation. No estimates have been made in relation to the cost of bringing forward legislation.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Finance for an update of parity in financial support for victims of contaminated blood in Northern Ireland with people in England, as committed to in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 840/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am pleased to advise that the Executive agreed to allocate some £1million, as part of the January monitoring round, to those affected by contaminated blood here. Going forward we will continue to prioritise this issue as referenced in New Decade New Approach.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance what action he is taking to deliver a Civil Service pay settlement.

(AQW 865/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I met with officials from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, who represent non-industrial civil servants, on 22 January. It was a constructive discussion. I appreciate the work Civil Servants do in supporting and delivering a wide range of public services and am committed to continued engagement with trade union colleagues. I will be working closely with Departmental officials to progress and resolve the NICS 2019/20 pay award for all Civil Service staff as soon as possible.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to detail the funding (i) his Department; and (ii) departmental arm's-length bodies have provided to each Irish language group and organisation in each of the last five years.

(AQW 881/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department and its arm's length bodies have not provided any funding to Irish language groups and organisations over the last five years.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Finance what plans are in place to resolve the pay dispute in the Civil Service and equal pay for Northern Ireland Office and Department of Justice employees.

(AQW 899/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In relation to the NICS pay dispute I met with officials from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, who represent non-industrial civil servants, on 22 January. It was a constructive discussion. I appreciate the work Civil Servants do in supporting and delivering a wide range of public services and am committed to continued engagement with trade union colleagues. I will be working closely with Departmental officials to progress and resolve the NICS 2019/20 pay award for all Civil Service staff as soon as possible.

In relation to the equal pay issue regarding NIO/PSNI employees, I understand a legal judgment given in 2013 ruled that this group of staff did not have a right to access the NICS equal pay settlement, as that settlement was only for service in the NICS. On that basis, there is no legal liability on the NICS to make payment on the basis of equal pay to this group.

Department of Health

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to outline the cost of addressing waiting lists to ensure the commitment in New Decade, New Approach of no one waiting over a year at 30 September 2019 for outpatient or inpatient assessment/treatment will still be on a waiting list by March 2021.

(AQW 220/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The cost of delivering the additional activity necessary to ensure that no one waiting over a year at 30 September 2019 for an outpatient assessment or treatment will still be on a waiting list by March 2021 is approximately £50m.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health to outline (i) what measures are in place; and (ii) what work has been implemented to tackle loneliness.

(AQW 245/17-22)

Mr Swann: My officials have met with the Institute of Public Health Ireland who have conducted research on this issue in Northern Ireland. This highlights that loneliness is a complex issue, and requires a multi-faceted and cross government approach to address the causes including socio-economic factors, such as inequality. My Department is scoping our existing policies/strategies to help identify how loneliness is being tackled within existing work; to identify gaps and further work needed to progress this important issue.

Within the Reform of Adult Social Care, work in progress includes proposals to develop a neighbourhood based, preventative and citizen-focused community support model that promotes positive social wellbeing and connects people to supportive social networks and communities. A public consultation is anticipated early in 2020. The Protect Life strategy acknowledges that loneliness is a contributor to poor mental health and work is progressing on the key theme of Physically Active and Connecting (staying in touch with family, friends and the community). As well as projects such as Men's Shed focusing on reducing isolation of men especially in rural areas which has proved an effective way of engaging people who experience loneliness.

The Department is also working cross departmentally and in partnership with DAERA as part of its Rural Society Project Board established in 2019. One aspect of this work is a focus on the need to 'reduce loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas and to minimise the impacts of rural isolation and promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers'.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what help he can provide Compass Counselling, Belfast, which is on the point of closure.

(AQW 267/17-22)

Mr Swann: Compass Counselling, which is not funded through any statutory services, have provided an excellent service to their clients in North and West Belfast and it is disappointing that they are unable to continue to do so. It is always disappointing to hear of the closure of organisations who provide such services.

Health and Social Care Trusts work closely with many organisations to provide a range of services in the community. However, all such services are funded in line with public procurement policy and it is not possible to provide funding to organisations outside of this framework.

It is also important to note that a range of counselling support is available to those who are vulnerable through Trust counselling services and other community and voluntary groups. The Lifeline 24/7 Helpline is available for those in distress or despair and anyone concerned about their mental health can also talk to their GP.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health for an update on a new Health and Wellbeing Centre in Bangor.

(AQW 277/17-22)

Mr Swann: Plans for a new Primary and Community Care Centre in Bangor are included in the Primary Care Infrastructure Draft Strategic Implementation Plan.

The Draft Implementation Plan includes provision for a new health centre to serve the population of the North Down and Newtownards area which I will consider alongside other capital investment priorities and will be dependent on future budget availability, value for money and affordability.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health to outline the steps taken to reduce medical supplies wastage in pharmacies in instances where medical supplies are not collected or returned to pharmacies unused.

(AQW 278/17-22)

Mr Swann: Medicines returned to community pharmacies cannot be reused because the pharmacist cannot be satisfied as to the integrity and quality of products that have left the pharmacy premises.

The Department's Medicines Optimisation Quality Framework (MOQF) sets out the strategic direction for improving and reforming medicine safety and effectiveness across health and social care in Northern Ireland. This includes quality standards expected across all health and social care settings for optimisation of medicines including reducing waste. For example, prescribers are expected to make arrangements for patients on repeat medications to have checks carried out before prescriptions are issued.

A number of initiatives have flowed from implementation of the MOQF with the aim of reducing medicines waste. For example, a project is ongoing with the aim of improving systems for ordering and supply of nutritional products, particularly within residential homes. Patients also have their medication reviewed

Last financial year, almost 30,000 patients in Northern Ireland had their medication reviewed in community pharmacies and received advice on how to use their medicine more effectively and reduce waste. The Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency have also previously organised public aware campaigns to highlight the volume of or expired medicines returned to community pharmacies.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Health when the Reshaping Stroke Care consultation report will be released.
(AQW 286/17-22)

Mr Swann: The public consultation on 'Reshaping Stroke Care – Saving Lives, Reducing Disability' closed on 30 August 2019, with 19,510 responses received.

My officials are in the process of finalising the consultation analysis. Once I have considered the analysis and recommendations from my officials, I intend to proceed with publication of the consultation analysis report.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on plans to have an adult mental health drop-in centre in Strabane.
(AQW 298/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently no plans to deliver an adult mental health drop-in service in Strabane. However a range of local mental health services are available.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health to outline what safeguards his Department has in place to protect patients who are allergic to latex.
(AQW 314/17-22)

Mr Swann: Latex is avoided within the healthcare environment unless there is a specific clinical requirement (typically for strength and flexibility). Where a medical device contains latex, this will be clearly identified pre-purchase.

Ultimately it is the responsibility of individual healthcare professionals to ensure that patient with a Latex allergy do not come in contact with the product containing Latex. Where a patient is known to have a Latex allergy it was clearly noted on their Patient Records.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health for the anticipated timescale for the rollout of the three rounds of In vitro fertilisation (IVF) provision as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 315/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am pleased that the New Decade, New Approach Agreement committed to providing 3 funded IVF cycles for eligible women.

The Regional Fertility Centre does not currently have the capacity to meet the demand for treatment arising from offering 3 cycles of IVF to all eligible women, as there are not enough trained staff to carry out the procedures, nor is there enough space at the premises to facilitate a higher number of patients.

My officials are currently giving urgent consideration to how this issue can be taken forward and as such I am unable to give a definitive implementation date at this stage.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to build a new health Centre in Donaghadee.
(AQW 335/17-22)

Mr Swann: At this time there are no plans to build a new health centre in Donaghadee.

Over the last 2 years the South Eastern HSC Trust has undertaken infrastructure works to the Donaghadee Health Centre to create an additional suite of 3 clinical rooms and the building has been re-roofed.

In addition, the Health and Social Care Board has provided funding to the South Eastern Trust in 2019/20 to complete design works to provide a further suite of clinical rooms within this financial year.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health, in the face of the climate change emergency, to outline what actions or policies his Department will (i) take; or (ii) adopt, (a) immediately; (b) in the short term; and (c) in the longer term to help reduce carbon emissions.
(AQW 363/17-22)

Mr Swann: Departmental policy requires Health and Social Care capital development schemes to meet the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Model score of "excellent". The Department shall continue to request that HSC Trusts identify and implement energy efficiency projects and ensure that HSC Trusts participate in the NICS Energy Management Strategy, launched in May 2019, with the aim to realise a 30% target in energy consumption across the NI public sector estate by 2030.

Looking ahead, HSC organisations will continue to drive reducing carbon emission reduction by increased energy efficiency of the existing estate; the use of electric and hybrid vehicles and encouraging greater use of public transport and cycling; the sustainable procurement of goods and services including food and effective waste management including increased recycling and reduction of waste to landfill.

For the longer term the Department of the Environment, Agriculture and Rural Affairs is the lead Department for emissions reduction and the Department of Health shall continue to participate in the Future Generations cross-departmental working group established to take forward climate change mitigation.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health whether he will (i) introduce safe staffing legislation; (ii) recruit additional nurses; and (iii) improve nursing bursary provision.

(AQW 389/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am committed to developing, in partnership with trade union colleagues, employers and others, the case for safe nurse staffing legislation to be introduced at the earliest legislative opportunity.

I and my Department are committed to working urgently to secure the required resources to implement the commitment in New Decade, New Approach, to implement the Executive's commitment to deliver an extra 900 nursing and midwifery undergraduate places over three years, starting in September 2020 with the first 300 additional places.

The pre-registration nursing and midwifery courses commissioned by my Department are consistently very heavily oversubscribed. I therefore see no need to bring forward any changes to our already very generous bursary provision.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health whether he will introduce an on-call wheelchair repair service.

(AQW 390/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Regional Wheelchair Service at the Belfast HSC Trust works with wheelchair users from across Northern Ireland to determine their needs and prescribe appropriate wheelchair equipment.

The wheelchair Approved Repairer carries out repairs in a wide range of locations, including the home. It is not safe or practical to carry out on site repairs in some settings. The service is in place 9 to 5 Monday to Friday. In line with wheelchair repair services throughout the UK, the Approved Repairer service in Northern Ireland is not funded by Health and Social Care Trusts to provide an on-call 24/7 repair service.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health whether an evaluation of the Community Crisis Intervention Service in Derry has been undertaken.

(AQW 394/17-22)

Mr Swann: An evaluation of the service was commissioned from Ulster University by Derry and Strabane District Council and we are currently awaiting a report. This is expected imminently.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health to outline his Department's commitment to the continuation of the Community Crisis Intervention Service in Derry.

(AQW 395/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Crisis Intervention Service in Derry is led by Derry and Strabane District Council. The Health and Social Care Board are currently considering a request for funding from the council to allow the project to continue until the end of March 2020. An evaluation report is awaited to inform future service provision.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health to detail the amount spent on (i) agency staff; (ii) locum staff; and (iii) bank staff in each Health and Social Care Trust, over the last three years.

(AQW 429/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department monitors expenditure on agency/locum staff and bank staff on a quarterly basis, for specific staffing categories, across financial years. Expenditure on (i) agency staff (excluding medical and dental agency); (ii) medical and dental agency/locum staff; and (iii) bank staff by Health and Social Care Trust, for the last three financial years, is given below;

Agency Spend over the last 3 Financial Years (excluding medical and dental agency)

Trust	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
BHSCT	£24,764,486	£29,728,830	£39,506,834
NHSCT	£15,189,182	£19,052,054	£23,282,976
SEHSCT	£8,883,807	£12,724,270	£13,854,361
SHSCT	£9,114,051	£9,762,479	£18,108,947
WHSCT	£7,522,710	£10,515,518	£17,680,048
NIAS	£617,899	£871,789	£2,126,207
Total Spend	£66,092,135	£82,654,940	£114,559,373

Medical and Dental Agency/Locum Expenditure over the last 3 Financial Years

Trust	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
BHSCT	£18,479,870	£18,789,536	£22,430,062

Trust	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
NHSCT	£12,321,220	£16,404,945	£17,503,264
SEHSCT	£8,707,389	£8,920,233	£10,636,954
SHSCT	£11,907,956	£12,785,008	£15,511,952
WHSCT	£17,238,467	£16,554,429	£20,656,870
NIAS	£0	£0	£0
Total Spend	£68,654,902	£73,454,151	£86,739,102

Bank Spend over the last 3 Financial Years

Trust	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
BHSCT	£22,442,269	£23,478,118	£26,212,080
NHSCT	£15,055,337	£15,282,467	£17,378,737
SEHSCT	£14,574,375	£16,596,564	£19,612,609
SHSCT	£10,249,634	£11,573,667	£14,058,633
WHSCT	£8,944,912	£9,781,295	£9,714,647
NIAS	£195,059	£227,154	£233,592
Total Spend	£71,461,586	£76,939,265	£87,210,298

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health what plans are in place for a new health hub in Strabane.

(AQW 441/17-22)

Mr Swann: Plans for a new Health and Care Centre in Strabane are included in the draft Primary Care Infrastructure Development Strategic Implementation Plan. Delivery of this plan continues to be considered alongside other capital investment priorities and will be dependent on future budget availability, value for money and affordability.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of social workers employed through an agency and on a full-time contract, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 491/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of social worker posts filled by agency staff is not held.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the e-Safety strategy.

(AQW 500/17-22)

Mr Swann: A public consultation on a draft e-Safety strategy took place in 2019. The draft strategy, now known as an On-line Safety strategy, and accompanying action plan are being finalised and subject to necessary approvals, including Executive agreement, will be published later this year.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health what policies his Department has in place to reduce the number of drug related and drug misuse deaths.

(AQW 509/17-22)

Mr Swann: In 2018, 189 deaths due to drug-related causes were registered in Northern Ireland, the highest number on record. The statistics also highlight that people living in the most deprived areas are five times more likely to die from a drug-related death than those living in the least deprived areas.

Making Life Better is the Executive's strategic framework for public health, designed to provide direction for policies and actions to improve the health and wellbeing of people and to reduce health inequalities in NI. Making Life Better commits all Departments to creating the conditions for individuals, families and communities to take greater control over their lives, and be enabled and supported to lead healthy lives.

I am keen to work with other Ministers and Departments to address the underlying causes of substance misuse, and tackle the issues related to deprivation and poverty that are linked to poor health outcomes, such as homelessness and loneliness. It is only by working holistically across all these issues that we will create the conditions to help prevent alcohol and drug related deaths.

Underpinning Making Life Better, my Department leads on NI's current substance misuse strategy – the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs, the overall aim of which is to reduce the harms caused by alcohol and drug misuse. A range of actions are being taken forward covering prevention and early intervention, harm reduction, treatment and support, and

law and criminal justice responses. As an example of the impact these actions have, through our Take Home Naloxone programme over 3,000 naloxone kits have been distributed to those most at risk of drug-related deaths, potentially saving over 400 lives since it was introduced in 2013.

As reflected in “New Decade, New Approach”, my Department has begun the development of a new substance misuse strategy. I plan to ensure this new strategy is developed and designed with input from all key stakeholders, including service users, to ensure that we improve services, and take innovative and effective action to reduce alcohol and drug related harm.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health to detail all organisations in Lagan Valley that received funding from his Department in each of the last three years.

(AQW 518/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department does not capture financial information by constituency.

Annex A contains a list of the voluntary and community sector organisations in receipt of core grant funding from my Department over the last three years, which operate within the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area.

Departmental core funding supports central administration costs (such as salaries; rent and office administration) of organisations which provide user advocacy; engage in policy development activity; research; and leadership and coordination within the Sector.

Annex A

Organisation	Funding Branch of DoH
Accord NI	Family Policy Unit
Children’s Law Centre	Family Policy Unit
Children in Northern Ireland	Family Policy Unit
Community Development & Health Network	Family Policy Unit
Harmony Community Trust	Family Policy Unit
Home-Start NI	Family Policy Unit
NICMA – Northern Ireland Childminding Association	Family Policy Unit
Parenting NI	Family Policy Unit
Relate NI	Family Policy Unit
Volunteer Now	Family Policy Unit
WRDA – Women’s Resource and Development Agency	Family Policy Unit
Adopt NI	Looked After Children and Adoption Unit
Adoption UK	Looked After Children and Adoption Unit
Family Care Adoption Services	Looked After Children and Adoption Unit
Family Routes (Formerly: Church of Ireland Board of Social Responsibility)	Looked After Children and Adoption Unit
Fostering Network	Looked After Children and Adoption Unit
VOYPIC – Voice of Young People in Care	Looked After Children and Adoption Unit
Childline NI	Child Protection Unit
Meningitis Research Foundation	Health Protection Unit
RoSPA – Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents	Health Protection Unit
British Red Cross	Emergency Planning Branch
Women’s Aid Federation NI	Adult Safeguarding Unit
Nexus NI	Adult Safeguarding Unit
Action on Hearing Loss	Physical and Sensory Disability Unit
Cedar Foundation	Physical and Sensory Disability Unit

Organisation	Funding Branch of DoH
Contact a Family	Physical and Sensory Disability Unit
Crossroads Caring for Carers (NI) Ltd	Physical and Sensory Disability Unit
Disability Action	Physical and Sensory Disability Unit
Epilepsy Action	Physical and Sensory Disability Unit
Everyday Harmony Music Therapy	Physical and Sensory Disability Unit
RNIB NI - Royal National Institute for the Blind Northern Ireland	Physical and Sensory Disability Unit
Sense NI	Physical and Sensory Disability Unit
Stroke Association	Physical and Sensory Disability Unit
Autism NI	Learning Disability Unit
Mencap NI	Learning Disability Unit
Down's Syndrome Associated	Learning Disability Unit
Society for Mucopolysaccharidic Disease (MPS Society)	Secondary Care Unit
Aids Care Education & Training	Health Improvement Policy Branch
Cara-Friend	Health Improvement Policy Branch
Life NI	Health Improvement Policy Branch
Positive Life	Health Improvement Policy Branch
Rainbow	Health Improvement Policy Branch
Informing Choices NI	Health Improvement Policy Branch
TAMBA – Twins and Multiple Births Association	Health Improvement Policy Branch
WINI – Women's Information Northern Ireland	Health Improvement Policy Branch
Action Mental Health	Mental Health Unit
ADD-NI	Mental Health Unit
AWARE	Mental Health Unit
CAUSE for Mental Health	Mental Health Unit
Cruse in Northern Ireland	Mental Health Unit
Eating Disorders Association	Mental Health Unit
Inspire Wellbeing	Mental Health Unit
Lighthouse Ltd	Mental Health Unit
Mindwise	Mental Health Unit
The Samaritans	Mental Health Unit
Threshold	Mental Health Unit
British Red Cross	Emergency Planning

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health (i) what action he is taking to alleviate the shortage of Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) patches; and (ii) what alternatives are being put in place to ensure women are not disadvantaged with the shortage of HRT medications.

(AQW 576/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department is aware of ongoing issues affecting the supply of some hormone replacement therapy (HRT) products throughout the UK due to manufacturing issues. There are well established arrangements in place for dealing with shortages when they do occur which can, on occasions, involve a GP prescribing an alternative to a patient's usual medicine. Although some HRT products are temporarily unavailable, supplies of a variety of other HRT preparations continue to remain

available. Patients experiencing difficulties in getting HRT products on prescription are advised to consult with their GP who will be able to advise them about the most appropriate alternative HRT options.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health how many patients are waiting for (i) hip replacements; and (ii) knee replacements in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 606/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of people waiting for (i) hip replacements and (ii) knee replacements at 30th September 2019, the most recent quarter for which official statistics are available, is presented in the table below.

Number of patients waiting for (i) hip and (ii) knee replacements at 30th September 2019

HSC Trust	(i) Hip Replacements	(ii) Knee Replacements
Belfast	1,738	1,807
South Eastern	<5*	<5*
Southern	520	598
Western	1,037	1,313

Source: DoH Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

*Specific numbers withheld to protect patient confidentiality.

Hip and Knee replacement operations are not carried out within the Northern HSC Trust and only revision surgery is carried out within South Eastern HSC Trust.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health whether women from the Republic of Ireland will be able to access abortion in Northern Ireland following the introduction of the new regulatory framework on abortion; and, if so, who would meet the costs.

(AQW 756/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 24 July 2019, the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 made provision to repeal, from 21 October 2019, the main legislation prohibiting abortion in Northern Ireland. Section 9 of the Act requires the Secretary of State to put in place by 31 March 2020 a new legislative framework based on the recommendations of the Committee for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women.

My Department awaits the response from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to the representations it received to its recent public consultation on the document 'A new legal framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland - Implementation of the legal duty under section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act 2019' and the final Regulations to be made by the UK Parliament. Thereafter the implementation of the Regulations will be for my Department to take forward. At this point, any service offered will form part of the health and social care provision in Northern Ireland.

Eligibility to receive publically funded healthcare in Northern Ireland is based on ordinary residence. A person will be accepted as ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland if they are here lawfully, voluntarily and for a settled purpose as part of their normal way of life for the time being. Anyone who is ordinarily resident is entitled to free healthcare in Northern Ireland.

It is unlikely that anyone travelling to Northern Ireland specifically to access abortion services would satisfy the ordinary residence test.

European Union (EU) rights provide for European citizens to seek treatment within the European Economic Area (EEA) and have the cost of that treatment met by their home state. There are two routes - the "S2 route" under EU Regulation 883/2004 on the coordination of social security systems or under Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients' rights to cross-border healthcare (Cross Border Directive).

The S2 route entitles individuals to seek approval for planned, state funded treatment in another EEA country. This treatment is funded between the home state of the individual and the state of treatment.

The Cross Border Directive is designed to allow individuals to access healthcare treatment in either the state or private sectors of another EEA country, pay for the treatment and seek reimbursement from their home state.

Decisions on any applications made by Republic of Ireland residents related to this are a matter for the Health Service Executive to determine.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health what plans he has for the retention of services at Causeway Hospital.

(AQW 803/17-22)

Mr Swann: Causeway is an important part of the acute hospital network. It has considerable strengths: skilled and dedicated staff, a strong link to its local community and excellent relationships with local GPs. Over £2m of transformation funding has been invested in Causeway over the past two years and sustainable development is continuing, in partnership with primary care and other stakeholders, to enable it to go on delivering high quality services to its local population as part of the integrated care network for the Causeway area.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Health how his Department is addressing the 24-48 hour delays in the release of deceased patients from the South West Acute Hospital due to no doctors being available to sign death certificates.

(AQW 812/17-22)

Mr Swann: The death certification process is legislated by the Births and Deaths Registration (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.

Death Certificates can only be signed by doctors who have seen and treated the patient within the 28 days prior to their demise. Therefore if the doctor who treated the patient is not immediately available, there may be a short delay in completing the Death Certificate - for example when a death occurs out of hours, at weekends or during holiday periods.

There may also be a delay if the certifying doctor has reason to report the death to the Coroner and consequently may not be in a position to complete the Death Certificate until the Coroner has decided what action should be taken.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust has confirmed that the South West Acute Hospital is not experiencing any unusual or unexpected delays in the issuing of death certificates.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health given its planned closure, what assessment his Department has made of the availability of places in the GP practices immediate to Ravenbank Surgery on Ravenhill Road, Belfast; and whether patients affected by the closure will be able to avail of the places in these immediate practices.

(AQW 894/17-22)

Mr Swann: The contract between Ravenbank Surgery, and the Health and Social Care Board for the provision of GP services will end on 31 March 2020. The practise will continue as normal until that date.

The HSCB is currently working with Ravenbank surgery and GP practices in the local vicinity to ensure that patients will continue to have access to GP services after this date, and will be writing to all affected patients in the next two weeks.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health what advice his Department has received from the Department of Health and Social Care regarding preparations to deal with the coronavirus.

(AQW 924/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is in daily contact with the relevant authorities across the UK, including the Department of Health and Social Care, to ensure that we have a coordinated approach both in terms of evidence based guidance and communications.

My Department will remain in close contact with the relevant authorities across the UK and the Republic of Ireland to ensure any necessary actions are taken in response to this situation.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to address the backlog of repairs to street lights that are not working in North Down.

(AQW 175/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I understand the concerns of the public affected by street light outage and working with my Department, I am working to find solutions as quickly as possible. Unfortunately my Department continues to face severe budgetary challenges and resources are not currently available to provide a full street lighting repair service. As a result, outages are taking longer than usual to be repaired. I can assure the member that priority is being given to hazardous electrical defects and group outages and that my officials are doing all that they can, within available budgets, to complete other repairs in as timely a fashion as possible.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a complete list of roads in need of resurfacing in the Holywood area.

(AQW 176/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not collate such a list. Rather it prepares annual programmes of work for road and pavement resurfacing that can be delivered within the available budget, using results of annual condition surveys and engineering assessments. I am aware that the resurfacing of roads is a concern to members of the public and while I recognise the importance of this matter, I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints. I will continue to work to find solutions that deliver better for our communities.

The programme for the current financial year for the Holywood area is included in the Annual Report 2019/20 provided to Ards and North Down Borough Council. This can be accessed via this link <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/annual-report-ards-and-north-down-borough-council-20192020>

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a complete list of roads in need of resurfacing in the Millisle area.

(AQW 177/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not collate such a list. Rather it prepares annual programmes of work for road and pavement resurfacing that can be delivered within the available budget, using results of annual condition surveys and engineering assessments. I understand the public's concern in relation to roads in need of resurfacing and recognise the importance of this issue. I have however inherited a severe and challenging budgetary environment within which I must operate. I will continue to work to find solutions that deliver for communities.

The programme for the current financial year for the Millisle area is included in the Annual Report 2019/20 provided to Ards and North Down Borough Council. This can be accessed via this link <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/annual-report-ards-and-north-down-borough-council-20192020>

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a complete list of roads in need of resurfacing in the Donaghadee area. (AQW 178/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not collate such a list. Rather it prepares annual programmes of work for road and pavement resurfacing that can be delivered within the available budget, using results of annual condition surveys and engineering assessments. I am aware that the resurfacing of roads is a concern to members of the public and while I recognise the importance of this matter, I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints. I will continue to work to find solutions that deliver better for our communities.

The programme for the current financial year for the Donaghadee area is included in the Annual Report 2019/20 provided to Ards and North Down Borough Council. This can be accessed via this link <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/annual-report-ards-and-north-down-borough-council-20192020>

However I am pleased an additional scheme is programmed for Millisle Road, Donaghadee. This scheme is not included in the Council report but can now be delivered due to receipt of additional in year funding the Department has secured.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a complete list of roads in need of resurfacing in the Bangor area. (AQW 179/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not collate such a list. Rather it prepares annual programmes of work for road and pavement resurfacing that can be delivered within the available budget, using results of annual condition surveys and engineering assessments. I am aware that the resurfacing of roads is a concern to members of the public and while I recognise the importance of this matter, I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints. I will continue to work to find solutions that deliver better for our communities.

The programme for the current financial year for the Bangor area is included in the Annual Report 2019/20 provided to Ards and North Down Borough Council. This can be accessed via this link <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/annual-report-ards-and-north-down-borough-council-20192020>

However I am pleased additional schemes which were not included in the Council report but can now be delivered due to receipt of additional in year funding the Department has secured are:

- Victoria Road, Bangor
- Victoria Drive, Bangor
- Ballymacormick Road, Bangor

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many street lighting repair teams are routinely available to carry out repair work in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area. (AQW 180/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As a result of severe budget cuts, the Department has had to restrict its street lighting maintenance service across Northern Ireland. Consequently, there is currently one street lighting repair team available to carry out repair work in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area, although on occasions this team is required to work in other Council areas.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the anticipated budget spend on the current road and footpath resurfacing project at Ballymacormick Road, Bangor. (AQW 181/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The estimated cost the footway and carriageway resurfacing scheme at Ballymacormick Road, Bangor is approximately £250,000.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether any further road or footpath resurfacing is scheduled for the area bounded by Ballymacormick Road, South Circular Road and Donaghadee Road, Bangor. (AQW 182/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Unfortunately due to severe budget cuts, the Department has had to restrict its resurfacing work programme across Northern Ireland.

Currently, there are no further road or footpath resurfacing schemes scheduled for the area bounded by Ballymacormick Road, South Circular Road and Donaghadee Road, Bangor. It is acknowledged that Hillside Gardens and Towerview Avenue are in need of resurfacing, and these will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the proposed Trooperslane park and ride scheme.
(AQW 187/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since 2013, my Department has delivered an additional 3,400 park and ride spaces across Northern Ireland. These have proven highly attractive and played a central role in the growth of passenger numbers on our rail services. As part of that programme, my Department has provided funding to Translink to take forward land acquisition at the proposed Trooperslane Park and Ride site.

However I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints. In light of this I am currently assessing the pressures across my department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in “New Decade: New Approach” and the budget made available for the period ahead. It is, therefore, too early to comment on availability of capital funding for delivery of the scheme at this stage.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to address the backlog of street lighting repairs in East Londonderry.
(AQW 206/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand the concerns of the public affected by street light outage and am working within my Department to address this issue as quickly as possible. Unfortunately as a result of severe budget cuts, the Department has had to restrict the street lighting maintenance service across Northern Ireland. As a result, outages are taking longer than usual and much longer than I would like, to be repaired. I can assure the Member that priority is being given to hazardous electrical defects and group outages and that my officials are doing all that they can, within available budgets, to complete other repairs in as timely a fashion as possible.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to ensure the provision of increased car parking at Bellarena Rail Halt, Magilligan.
(AQW 209/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since 2013, my Department has delivered an additional 3,400 Park and Ride spaces across Northern Ireland. These facilities have proven highly attractive and played a central role in the growth of passenger numbers on our rail and Goldline services. As part of that programme, Translink is currently undertaking a feasibility study and associated business case into the provision of a dedicated Park and Ride facility at Bellarena Halt

I have, however, inherited severe and challenging budget constraints. I will be assessing the pressures across my department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in “New Decade: New Approach” and the budget made available for the period ahead. It is, therefore, too early to comment on availability of capital funding for this project.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department’s commitment to the strategic plan for greenway infrastructure.
(AQW 234/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Greenways have the potential to bring significant benefits to us all in terms of more physically active lifestyles, active travel, improved mental and physical health and wellbeing, social inclusion, tackling climate change, the strengthening of the local economy and tourism.

Over the coming weeks I want to carefully consider how provision of greenways can assist as part of my vision to enable greener infrastructure and greater sustainable transport that connects communities and improves lives.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider the provision of a bus service from Limavady to Bellarena railway station.
(AQW 255/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Enhancing the connections between bus and rail services is an important element that helps connect communities and improves people’s lives by providing additional choices for sustainable travel.

I understand that Translink currently provides a bus service from Limavady that connects with train services at Bellarena. This service was reviewed in 2018 to enhance integration between the bus and rail services, Translink will continue to monitor the service for any changes in demand from passengers.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what is being done to bring electrically assisted pedal cycle licensing requirements into line with those in other jurisdictions.
(AQW 309/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the current situation regarding the use of electrically assisted pedal cycles (EAPCs) in NI, and I am particularly conscious of the disparity with GB and Ireland. Current NI regulatory requirements include the need to register, license and insure EAPCs before use, and the rider must wear a helmet and hold a valid or full driving licence.

This is an issue I wish to examine closely, to determine how I wish to proceed.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update as to her Department's position on the grandfathering of privileges of the D1 (Not for Hire or Reward) licence.

(AQW 312/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) Regulations (NI) 1996 set out the requirements to be met by drivers operating under category D1 (not for hire and reward) driving licence.

Prior to my appointment, the Department consulted with key stakeholders on minibus driving licences in 2017. Following the consultation the Department published minibus driver guidance (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/driving-minibus>) which included information for drivers operating on a category D1 (not for hire or reward) driving licence which can also be referred to as grandfather rights.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to roll out the residents' only parking scheme piloted in Belfast to other areas of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 321/17-22)

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 underway.

I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme inform wider policy on implementing residents' parking schemes in advance of considering rolling out schemes to any other areas.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department plans to review local taxi legislation; and, given the low pass rate, whether she intends to instigate a review into the PSV License test and procedures.

(AQW 327/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the important role that the taxi industry plays, both to transport networks and also to communities by providing a valuable service every day to people and businesses in our cities, towns and rural communities.

I also understand that there are a number of areas of the current taxi regime that continue to generate both interest and concern amongst stakeholders. I have asked my officials to provide me with detailed briefing on this subject and intend to consider the issues in greater detail in the coming weeks.

I have a number of important issues to consider during my first days in office and I am working through these.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) the extent of oversight and scrutiny her Department has exercised over Local Authorities since the transfer of planning functions following Local Government Reform on 1 April 2015; and (ii) how this has been documented.

(AQW 329/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I refer the member to my answer in AQW 259/17-22 which outlines my Department's statutory role in relation to local authorities and the 2-tier planning system since 1 April 2015. The extent of these statutory powers are wide ranging and they have been exercised, for example, through the scrutiny of the development plan process, measurement of statutory performance, assessment of notified applications and the call-in of certain local authority planning applications.

In addition, to assist and guide officers engaged in the planning system in Northern Ireland, my officials have also developed a significant amount of planning policy, guidance and practice notes all of which are available on the Department for Infrastructure's website. Information and correspondence with local authorities is documented electronically within my Department's file storage system.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans Northern Ireland Railways has to reopen the loop line between Antrim and Portadown, to enable trains from Derry to connect directly with Dublin and the Irish Rail Network.

(AQW 332/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The reopening of the loop line from Antrim to Portadown is not required to enable trains from Derry to connect with Dublin and the Irish rail network. My Department is currently developing options which would provide service connections between Derry and Dublin utilising existing track. However, while I recognise the importance of improving rail connections in building connectivity and improving people's lives across the North of Ireland, there are many other challenges within my Department. Given the severe and challenging budget constraints I have inherited, I will be assessing the pressures across my department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead. It is, therefore, too early to comment on funding will be available to enhance the rail network.

My Department is also developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan which will inform priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks. Tackling regional imbalance and connecting communities are priorities for me. I expect to consider draft proposals and options in the coming weeks and months.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Infrastructure what sections of the rail infrastructure has speed limits relating to maintenance issues; and when these sections will be repaired.
(AQW 334/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is clear that funding for the maintenance of the rail network here over recent years has been significantly below what is needed.

Currently two sections of the rail network are operating with speed restrictions due to maintenance requirements. The first is a 0.5 mile section of twin track between Whiteabbey and Fortwilliam where speed is currently restricted to 50mph against a design speed of 70mph. The second is a 200 metre section of single line track at Templepatrick that is currently restricted to 70mph against a design speed of 90mph.

I am committed to working to find a solution that will modernise our transport system, making travel safer, cleaner and more efficient thereby enhancing lives and our economy. I am committed to working to find solutions that will modernise our transport, making travel safer, cleaner and more efficient, thereby changing lives and our economy.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the feasibility and benefits of a bridge between Northern Ireland and Scotland.
(AQW 337/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have not carried out an assessment of the feasibility of a bridge between Northern Ireland and Scotland but I understand that it is a project of such complexity and cost that feasibility may be difficult to establish. Given the challenges we face in maintaining the infrastructure we already rely on and in improving our public transport, cycling and walking, water and sewerage and roads networks, it is difficult to see how such a project would be either deliverable or affordable in the short to medium term.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan will go out to consultation.
(AQW 343/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP). The RSTNTP will be of huge importance in setting transport investment priorities for the next 15 years and it is critical that there is broad agreement. There is a substantial body of work to be completed before I can publish the Draft document.

Once I have identified my preferred options and priorities, I will issue a draft for public consultation. I expect that this consultation process will commence within the year.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the proposed timeframe for the public inquiry on the A5 Western Transport Corridor.
(AQW 344/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The public inquiry on the A5 Western Transport Corridor scheme is scheduled to open on 18 February 2020 when it will consider environmental matters over a proposed 4 day period. It will then reconvene on 11 March 2020 to consider other matters relating to the scheme over a proposed 3 day period.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the provision of a full programme of weed control in 2020/21 in North Down.
(AQW 352/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's current approach to weed control is to carry out treatment as required to keep maintained areas weed free from 1 April to 31 October.

Budgets for 2020/21 have not as yet been finalised, so the approach for routine maintenance functions such as weed control is not known at this time.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the implementation of residents' parking schemes in North Down.
(AQW 353/17-22)

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 underway. I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme inform wider policy on implementing residents' parking schemes.

I understand that requests for residents' parking in Holywood and Bangor have already been received by my Department. I can assure the Member that my officials are assessing these in the context of developing a new approach to residents' parking schemes that incorporates the learning from the first scheme.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) whether it is her Department's responsibility to safeguard the integrity and credibility of the planning system; (ii) what action she will take in relation to planning permission at the Knock Iveagh historical site; and (iii) whether she will liaise with the Minister for Communities to ensure action is taken to reverse the planning decision based on their findings, as outlined to the Friends of Knock Iveagh in a Freedom of Information request. **(AQW 373/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: My Department's responsibilities in relation to the 2-tier planning system are set out primarily in the Planning Act (NI) 2011. It is ultimately the responsibility of all stakeholders involved in the process, including my Department, to safeguard the integrity and credibility of the planning system.

Enforcement investigations, as well as a number of live planning applications, relating to the development at the Knock Iveagh site remain under investigation and consideration by Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. Under the 2-tier planning system local councils are responsible for the proper administration and processing of their own planning and/or enforcement cases in the first instance. Whilst these processes are ongoing, it would not be appropriate for me to take any actions or to comment further to ensure that the considerations of the council are not undermined. However, my officials will continue to engage with DfC officials on this case as appropriate and I have instructed my Permanent Secretary to liaise with the council to emphasise the need for them to bring closure to this case as soon as possible.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure what proposals she has to bring forward a strategy aimed at reducing rush hour congestion on the main arterial routes into Belfast city centre, including the provision and enhancement of dedicated cycle lanes. **(AQW 403/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: All major future transport investment in the wider Belfast area, including that aimed at reducing rush hour congestion on the arterial routes, needs to be considered in terms of how it will impact on social, environmental and economic objectives.

In relation to the provision and enhancement of dedicated cycle lanes, over the coming weeks I want to carefully consider how provision of cycle routes in Belfast and other urban areas can assist as part of my vision to enable infrastructure that provides more sustainable transport that connects communities and improves lives.

In the longer term, my Department is currently preparing, for my consideration, a new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) for the area which will consider all modes of transport, including cycling, and how they integrate with land use development. It is very important that I take into account the future development plans of Belfast City Council and the neighbouring councils. Therefore, in addition to Belfast City Council, the BMTP will include the surrounding council areas to enable consideration to be given to the main commuter flows into Belfast City Centre from neighbouring council districts. The new BMTP will provide the framework for transport policy and investment decisions for the greater Belfast area up until 2035. The new Draft BMTP will be open to public consultation.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many fines have been issued to taxi drivers driving in bus lanes over the financial years; (i) 2017/18; and (ii) 2018/19. **(AQW 404/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: The information requested is not available as no distinction is made in the enforcement process between a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN) issued to taxis and that issued to any other vehicle found contravening bus lane restrictions.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all departmental decisions that were not taken in the absence of a Minister during the period January 2017 to January 2020. **(AQW 418/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: There are 15 decisions which could not be taken in the absence of a Minister and these are listed below for your information:

- Whether or not to introduce remote control parking in Northern Ireland.
- Whether or not a new class of Mobility Scooter should be introduced to increase the range of medical equipment that can be carried on the scooter.
- Whether or not to approve legislation prepared to exempt e-bikes from legislative scope in Northern Ireland.
- Whether or not to increase penalties for the illegal use of a mobile phone while driving and the review of the existing offence.
- Whether or not to accept statutory responsibility for the Reservoirs Act (NI) 2015 from the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.
- Whether or not to amend the constitution of the Drainage Council as provided by the Drainage (NI) Order 1973.
- Whether or not to proceed to develop amendments to the 2011 & 1967 Transport Acts.

- Whether or not to proceed with affirmative subordinate regulation on Transport Shared Facilities Regulations.
- Whether or not to proceed to develop amendments to the Road Traffic Regulation (NI) Order 1997.
- Whether or not an amendment should be made to current planning legislation to remove existing permitted development rights for petroleum (oil & gas) exploration.
- Decision on the detail of reporting on the implementation of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 to be set out in subordinate legislation.
- Whether or not to progress a Review of Strategic Planning Policy for Renewable Energy.
- Whether or not to progress a Review of Strategic Planning Policy for Development in the Countryside.
- Whether or not to introduce an experimental scheme to allow class A taxis to use bus lanes.
- Whether or not to approve legislation to allow offences under the International Road Transport (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 and Trailer Registration (EU Exit) Regulations 2018: Financial Penalty Notices.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to expand e-car charging point infrastructure.

(AQW 432/17-22)

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, creating a network whereby no electric vehicle driver in Northern Ireland is more than 10 miles from a Fast charge point, or 30 miles from a Rapid charge point at any stage of their journey. The e-car public charge point network in Northern Ireland 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.

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.

My Department closely monitors funding opportunities for the installation of additional charge point infrastructure. My officials will work with commercial providers to ensure that the installation of any additional charge point infrastructure remains fit for purpose commensurate with growth.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) which areas are under consideration for residents' only parking schemes; (ii) the timescales for introduction.

(AQW 445/17-22)

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 underway. I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme inform wider policy on implementing residents' parking schemes.

Since the implementation of the Belfast scheme, the Department has received requests for many residents' parking schemes across the north. I can assure the Member that my officials are assessing all these in the context of developing a new approach to residents' parking schemes that incorporates the learning from the first scheme, in advance of considering rolling out schemes to any other areas in Northern Ireland. At this stage, we are not in a position to advise on timescales for considering future schemes, as this is dependent on successful evaluation of the performance of the initial scheme.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail any plans for the provision of funding to (i) facilitate the upgrade of existing; and (ii) development of new greenways.

(AQW 446/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Greenways have the potential to bring significant benefits to us all in terms of more physically active lifestyles, active travel, improved mental and physical health and wellbeing, social inclusion, tackling climate change, the strengthening of the local economy and tourism.

Over the coming weeks I want to carefully consider how provision of greenways can assist as part of my vision to enable greener infrastructure and greater sustainable transport that connects communities and improves lives.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures are planned to be put in place at Meadowbrook crossroads, Tullygally East Road, Craigavon to improve road safety.

(AQW 475/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that the junction at Tullygally East Road, Old Portadown Road and Meadowbrook in Craigavon has previously been assessed by officials, but did not meet the threshold for the provision of collision remedial measures.

I am aware of a collision at this location in recent days and can advise that my professional engineering officials will be reviewing any information made available by the PSNI, after it has completed its investigation into the collision.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will include the B47 Glenelly Road on the winter gritting schedule.

(AQW 489/17-22)

Ms Mallon: To assist the safe movement of traffic in wintry conditions, my Department works to salt the main traffic routes. At present our approach is generally to salt roads that carry more than 1,500 vehicles per day and, in exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography and those carrying between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day. All of the B47 Glenelly Road is on the schedule of gritting routes with the exception of the 11 mile section between Cranagh and Draperstown. I understand that this stretch currently carries around 600 vehicles per day, which is less than half of the current required threshold figure. While the Glenelly Road between Cranagh and Draperstown does not meet the current criteria for inclusion in the salted network, it is included on our scheduled list for secondary treatment in periods of prolonged ice or snow.

I would like to be able to expand our gritting service to many other routes but it is simply not feasible to do this at present due to the severe budget constraints and many other pressures faced by my Department; an issue I hope to address with Executive Colleagues.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action is being taken to implement drink-driving legislation that lowered the limit to 22 micrograms of alcohol per 100ml of breath.

(AQW 563/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Road Traffic (Amendment) Act 2016 provides the powers for a new drink drive regime in Northern Ireland. The main features include two new lower drink drive limits [22 and 9 mg of alcohol per 100 millilitres of breath] with the lower limit applying to novice and some professional drivers.

The first phase of the new drink drive regime was introduced in November 2016 when the Department commenced new powers for the police to establish dedicated breath testing checkpoints at the roadside. A suite of Statutory Rules is needed to implement the remaining elements of the new regime. However the police will need new mobile evidential breath-testing devices in order to test effectively at the new lower limits. All approved devices are subject to a robust Home Office type approval process. I am advised that there has been significant slippage in the procurement process and that development, procurement and calibration of devices will not be completed until July 2021.

I am concerned at the delay in introducing the new arrangements. I recognise the importance of this matter and I am committed to making our roads safer for all. I intend to look closely at all possible options in the coming weeks.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans to increase car parking capacity at Moira railway station.

(AQW 568/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since 2013, my Department has delivered an additional 3,400 park and ride spaces across Northern Ireland. These facilities have proven highly attractive and played a central role in the growth of passenger numbers on our rail services. As part of that programme, Translink are currently procuring land to provide a dedicated Park and Ride facility at Moira Train Station.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what steps are being taken to address the multiple street light outages in North Down, resulting from the unavailability of an external maintenance contractor.

(AQW 569/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As a result of severe budget cuts, the Department has had to restrict its street lighting repair service. As a result, outages are taking longer than usual to be repaired. I can assure the member that priority is being given to hazardous electrical defects and group outages and that my officials are doing all that they can, within available budgets, to complete other repairs in as timely a fashion as possible.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) why motorists were refused their MOT Tests in Newtownards Vehicle Test Centre on Wednesday 22 January 2020; (ii) whether those affected will be offered a free re-test; and (iii) when the test centre will be fully reopened.

(AQW 824/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The health and safety of all staff and customers visiting MOT centres is my first priority. In ensuring their safety, there has been disruption to services and inconvenience caused to customers due to a fault identified with vehicle lifts in MOT centres.

Recognising the disruption caused to people across the north, I have instructed DVA to pay the maximum amount of compensation that is permissible under the relevant legislation. All customers who have their test cancelled by the DVA will receive a free retest and a refund of half of the cost of the test.

I understand that this is a matter of concern for the public and I will continue to seek a swift and safe solution to get operations fully functioning again. I have instructed officials to prepare a full review into how this situation arose, the contingency planning in place and communication with the public. Test Centres will be reopened when I am assured that the safety of DVA staff and customers is guaranteed.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on (i) faults identified on car lifts at Armagh Vehicle Test Centre; (ii) the number of appointments cancelled at vehicle test centres as a result of similar faults; and (iii) her assessment on the impact on customers obtaining an MOT appointment.

(AQW 904/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The health and safety of all staff and customers visiting MOT centres is my first priority. In ensuring their safety, there has been disruption to services and inconvenience caused to customers due to a fault identified with vehicle lifts in MOT centres, including the Armagh test centre.

This situation has led to around 10,680 tests being cancelled across the network of 15 test centres from Tuesday 21 to Tuesday 28 January. During this period, DVA has continued to conduct over 17,000 vehicle tests.

I am very mindful of the impact this disruption is having on the public and their working and daily lives. On Friday 24 January, I instructed the DVA to begin issuing Temporary Exemption Certificates (TECs) as soon as practically possible. TECs are being issued to those customers who have expired MOTs as a result of the DVA cancelling their tests. The exemptions will apply for four months, allowing DVA customers to continue to go about their daily lives without further disruption. However four year old cars cannot get a TEC because they do not have an MOT to extend and the legislation does not permit the DVA to issue TECs for taxis. Therefore the heavy duty lanes are being used to prioritise taxis, 4 year old car customers and car dealership as well as testing heavy goods vehicles and buses.

I have also instructed DVA to pay the maximum amount of compensation that is permissible under the relevant legislation. All customers who have their test cancelled by the DVA will receive a free retest and a refund of half of the cost of the test.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to increase testing capacity at MOT test centres to address the current backlog.

(AQW 1041/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current situation is not acceptable and I have instructed the DVA to work urgently to get a safe, sustainable and trusted service up and running as soon as and as safely as possible. Testing on heavy goods vehicles and buses is continuing and the heavy duty lanes are also being used to prioritise taxis and four year old car customers, for private customers and dealerships. All other customers except taxis and those with four year old cars will be automatically issued an MOT exemption certificate which they can use to tax their vehicle and thereby continue to drive. I have also instructed officials to ensure extended opening hours are in place in order to minimise disruption to customers.

Two new lifts have been installed to provide additional capacity, one in Belfast and one in Derry. These lifts were pre-ordered at the end of 2019 as part of a programme to increase capacity within the testing network. Their deployment has now been accelerated due to the current disruption. These lifts will be independently assessed and checked before becoming operational. More information will follow on when and how these two new lifts will be operational.

I have also instructed my Permanent Secretary to commission two separate reviews, which I will oversee. The first is an investigation of the timeline and events that led up to the situation that arose last night. I need greater assurance than I have at present about the maintenance and testing regime in operation and about the way in which initial concerns about the lifting equipment were followed up and addressed. I want to know the precise timeline and to understand who knew what and when and all actions taken. This review will be carried out independently by professional auditors managed from outside the Department.

I have also commissioned a second review which will be carried out by an external expert who will provide me with independent advice on the steps that need to be taken to return our MOT centres urgently to a position where a full testing service can be provided. I am determined that all options will be explored to minimise the disruption to customers but the safety of staff and customers will continue to be my top priority.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she will ensure that taxi drivers do not suffer financial loss if their PSV date expires, given they will not be issued with exemption certificates.

(AQW 1131/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current situation is not acceptable and I have instructed the DVA to work urgently to get a safe, sustainable and trusted service up and running as soon as and as safely as possible. Testing on heavy goods vehicles and buses is continuing and the heavy duty lanes are also being used to prioritise taxis and four year old car customers, for private customers and dealerships. All other customers except taxis and those with four year old cars will be automatically issued an MOT exemption certificate which they can use to tax their vehicle and thereby continue to drive. I have also instructed officials to ensure extended opening hours are in place in order to minimise disruption to customers.

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Department of Justice

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice to outline (i) what measures are in place; and (ii) what work has been implemented to tackle loneliness.

(AQW 244/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Whilst recognising the Department for Communities (DfC) is the policy lead for tackling loneliness, the Department of Justice (DoJ) has undertaken a number of activities below which, whilst addressing our community safety mandate, have some indirect impacts on tackling the issue of loneliness.

The DoJ has provided input to the DfC Active Ageing Strategy in relation to addressing fear of crime and community safety by engaging and understanding the concerns of older people, who can sometimes be impacted by loneliness, through Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs); Support Hubs; the Scamwise partnership, which highlights and supports those who may be vulnerable to becoming the victims of scams; and the Support Responder Service.

The Support Responder Service centres on St Johns Ambulance volunteers providing immediate practical and emotional support to older people in the short term if they become victims of crime in an effort to reduce the immediate impact of the crime.

The annual funding provided to PCSPs by the DoJ enables them to address crime, fear of crime and anti-social behaviour. Some PCSP fear of crime initiatives such as the Good Morning scheme and intergenerational work indirectly help to address the issue of loneliness.

The Good Morning schemes aim to address the isolation, loneliness, fear of crime and the barriers many older people face in their daily lives when trying to be an active member of their community. The schemes support mainly elderly people through a simple "Good Morning" phone call to people who are identified as being on their own. As well as a daily morning call which provides reassurance, the volunteers also offer medication and appointment reminders and a comprehensive signposting service.

The intergenerational examples include PCSP projects which benefit individuals and the wider community by increasing self-confidence, encouraging a sense of belonging in the community, challenge negative stereotypes and reduce fear between generations.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Justice whether she has plans to change her ministerial car to one which is powered by electricity or any other non-fossil fuel.

(AQW 282/17-22)

Mrs Long: A Ministerial car has not been assigned to the Department of Justice (DoJ). Ministers of Justice are provided with transport as part of the agreed close protection security measures supplied by the PSNI. We, therefore, do not hold the information you have requested.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to outline (i) whether the Police Service of Northern Ireland will be increased to 7,500 officers; (ii) how long she believes this process will take; and (iii) the costs involved.

(AQW 287/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Executive has committed, as part of the 'New Decade, New Approach' deal, agreed in January 2020, to increase police numbers to 7,500 officers. In terms of the length of the process the key factor will be the availability of Executive funding. There are also other considerations such as discussions with PSNI around ongoing requirements and operational considerations which are a matter for the Chief Constable. The Chief Constable has estimated the costs to be in the region of £40 million per annum, which covers the salary-related costs and a provision for ancillary costs.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice for an update on legal aid reform.

(AQW 354/17-22)

Mrs Long: The purpose of legal aid reform has been to ensure access to justice while improving value for money. A lot has already been achieved to reduce costs and improve delivery but there is still much more to do. I will be engaging with my officials to examine the opportunities for continuing the reform journey.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to outline; (i) the number of prisoners being held in a separated prison regime in HMP Maghaberry; (ii) how this has changed over the last 3 years; and (iii) the extra annual cost attributed to maintaining the separated regime.

(AQW 483/17-22)

Mrs Long: The number of prisoners held in the separated regime at Maghaberry Prison is shown in the table below.

	Population of Separation
01/01/2018	39
01/01/2019	31
01/01/2020	29

The population of separation fluctuates, however during this period the overall number of separated prisoners has decreased.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service have estimated that it costs approximately £2m per annum to operate separation as a distinct unit within Maghaberry Prison.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the future of courthouses in West Tyrone.

(AQW 494/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) is developing an Estates Strategy to identify the optimal configuration of the NICTS Estate to meet future users' needs.

No decision has been taken on the future of any courthouses, including those in West Tyrone.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of orders that have been made by the High Court of Justice in Northern Ireland prohibiting publicity on the granting of injunctive relief since 30 April 2012; (ii) when each order was made; (iii) the number that are extant; (iv) whether any such orders have been discharged since 30 April 2012; and (v) the total of orders, whenever made, extant at the date of answer.

(AQW 507/17-22)

Mrs Long: The table below details the number of orders that have been made by the High Court prohibiting publicity on the granting of injunctive relief since 30 April 2012.

The exact date when an order was made or discharged cannot be provided without a risk of contravening the terms of the order.

Year	Number of "Super Injunctions" granted	Status as at 21 January 2020
2012	0	-
2013	1	Live
2014	0	-
2015	1	Discharged 2018
2016	3	Live Discharged 2017
2017	2	1 Live 1 Discharged 2017
2018	0	-
2019	1	Live
2020*	0	-
Total	8	Live Discharged 2017 1 Discharged 2018

*data for 2020 are provided up to and including 10 January 2020

In addition there were six orders made between 2006 and 2012 prohibiting publicity on the granting of the injunctive relief and of these three remain extant. Information prior to 2006 is not readily available and could only be compiled at a disproportionate cost.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Justice how many sentences of imprisonment have been imposed following convictions for animal cruelty, in each of the last five years

(AQW 580/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is outlined in the table below. The most recent year for which finalised information is available is 2018.

Convictions at courts for animal cruelty offences, 2014 – 2018

Year	Convictions	Convictions which resulted in a custodial sentence
2014	57	10
2015	50	3
2016	65	7
2017	51	4
2018	68	5

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to cases prosecuted by PPS on behalf of PSNI or other bodies.
- 2 Figures relate to initial disposal at court only. Results of appeals are not included. 3. Figures relate to cases with a conviction for at least one animal cruelty related offence.
- 4 Animal cruelty offences included are relevant offences under Welfare of animals Act 1972, Wildlife Act 1985, Welfare of Animals (Transport) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (NI) 2011, Welfare of Animals Act 2011, Welfare of Livestock Regulations (NI) 1995, Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 and Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996.
- 5 Figures relating to convictions at courts for 2019 will be available by early summer 2020.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of (i) prosecutions; and (ii) convictions for human trafficking-related offences in each of the last five years.

(AQW 627/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is outlined in the table below. The most recent year for which finalised information is available is 2018.

Prosecutions and Convictions for Human Trafficking Offences in relation to cases dealt with at Courts, 2014-2018

Year Dealt With	Prosecutions	Convictions
2014	4	1
2015	-	-
2016	6	4
2017	2	-
2018	8	3

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to initial disposals at court. Appeals are not included.
- 2 Figures relate to cases where there was a prosecution or conviction for at least one of the offences specified.
- 3 Figures include offences prosecuted under Sexual Offences Act 2003, Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and Asylum and Immigration Act 2004.
- 4 Figures relate to cases dealt with in the years specified.
- 5 Figures relating to prosecutions and convictions at courts for 2019 will be available by early summer 2020.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice how many victims of human trafficking have successfully claimed compensation under the criminal injury compensation scheme in each of the last five years; and how much money they received from the scheme.

(AQW 714/17-22)

Mrs Long: Over the last five years there have been no successful applications from victims of human trafficking under the Criminal Injury Compensation Scheme. There have been a total of 10 applications during this period, eight of which have been denied and two are currently being processed by Compensation Services.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Justice what consideration her Department has given to selling off the abandoned PSNI station in Castlederg, to allow the site to be positively utilised for the economic and social regeneration of the area.
(AQW 741/17-22)

Mrs Long: The management of the PSNI estate is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, for which he is accountable to the Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Policing Board.

You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice how many (i) prosecutions; and (ii) convictions have been made under Sections 23 and 24 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 for actions that caused an abortion, in each of the last 5 years.
(AQW 754/17-22)

Mrs Long: Information on the number of prosecutions and convictions for offences under Sections 23 and 24 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 is outlined in the table below. The most recent year for which finalised information is available is 2018.

Prosecutions and Convictions at courts for offences under Section 23 and 24 of 'Offences against the Person Act 1861', 2014-2018

Year	Prosecutions	Convictions
2014	*	*
2015	0	0
2016	*	0
2017	*	0
2018	*	0

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to initial disposals at court. Appeals are not included.
 - 2 Figures relate to cases where there was a prosecution or conviction for at least one offence under the legislation specified.
 - 3 Figures relate to cases dealt with in the year specified.
 - 4 Figures relating to prosecutions and convictions at courts for 2019 will be available by early summer 2020.
- * means a figure of less than 3 has been treated under rules of disclosure.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice when she will approve the list of candidates for the Queen's Counsel which has been outstanding since June 2019.
(AQW 761/17-22)

Mrs Long: The recommendations of the QC Selection Panel were received in the Department on 15 January 2020. I wrote on 23 January to advise the recommended candidates that I have accepted the Panel's recommendation that they should be appointed as Queen's Counsel.

Department for the Economy

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of Sensata Technologies' decision to close its factory in Carrickfergus.
(AQW 270/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The proposed closure of Carrickfergus is deeply upsetting news for the employees and families. Our thoughts are with the employees impacted by the news.

Sensata Technologies stated that there has been a well-documented fall in the global automotive industry and this has been further heightened by consolidation in the market, with existing customers being absorbed into large entities whose manufacturing processes use alternative products. This has been part of the reason for a significant drop in demand for the product lines currently manufactured in Carrickfergus.

Global businesses have to respond to the realities of market demand and unfortunately sometimes have to make difficult decisions to protect the core business. In this case, Sensata Technologies has confirmed it plans to continue to manufacture products in Northern Ireland at their Antrim site. The company has also advised that it is on target to invest in a R&D centre of excellence here in Northern Ireland.

Sensata Technologies remains a major employer in Northern Ireland and Invest NI will look to support it, where it can, in its future growth plans.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the impact on further education of post-primary schools offering more vocational subjects at sixth form.

(AQW 294/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is currently working with the Department of Education (DE) on the Transition of Young People into Careers Project which aims to develop a more strategic and joined up approach to education and training provision for 14 to 19 year olds. The development of a collaborative approach to post-16 education will provide an opportunity to clearly articulate the purpose of both Sixth Forms and FE colleges and to explore how they can complement each other in providing young people with the learning pathways which best meet their needs. Given the current budgetary pressures, I am keen to explore this unique opportunity to improve efficiency, quality, reduce duplication and improve outcomes for the learner.

I recognise the importance of providing young people with the vocational skills needed to grow the Northern Ireland economy and my Department is currently investing £220 million in seven new capital projects across the further education sector to provide learners with access to modern industry-standard premises and state of the art facilities.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline his Department's position on the future of Air Passenger Duty.
(AQW 300/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I will continue to stress to the UK Government my view, and that of previous Northern Ireland Ministers, which is that Air Passenger Duty is an unfair tax, which has a particularly detrimental impact on Northern Ireland passengers, and which should be addressed at a national level.

I have written to the Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Transport and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy seeking meetings, and I have asked my officials to work closely with relevant colleagues in UK Government, to ensure that Northern Ireland's views are included in their recently announced reviews into Air Passenger Duty and Regional Air Connectivity.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister for the Economy, in the face of the climate change emergency, to outline what actions or policies her Department will (i) take; or (ii) adopt, (a) immediately; (b) in the short term; and (c) in the longer term to help reduce carbon emissions.

(AQW 365/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: DAERA leads on the response to the challenge of climate change. My department will continue to work closely with DAERA to develop a co-ordinated response to the challenge of achieving net-zero carbon by 2050.

My department's work on developing a new Energy Strategy, in the context of the UK's legislative target of net zero carbon by 2050, will be a major component of the contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Energy related activities are responsible for 64% of all greenhouse gas emissions. The development of a new Energy Strategy is therefore a vital component of a response to climate change issues.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans to change her ministerial car to one which is powered by electricity or any other non-fossil fuel.

(AQW 370/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I do not have any plans to change my Ministerial car at present.

When the present car reaches the end of its service life, I would be keen for the Department to consider all options, including vehicles powered by electric or alternative fuels.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of jobs Invest NI created in West Tyrone in each of the last three years.

(AQW 383/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Businesses supported by Invest Northern Ireland in the West Tyrone area created 257 additional jobs in 2017 and 259 in 2018. Invest NI moved to outcome based reporting in line with the draft Programme for Government, therefore the information provided is the earliest available.

For the Member's information, Invest NI annually publishes offer activity data on OpenDataNI: <https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset/open-data-up-to-17-18-csv-file-uploaded-csv-13-to-2016-17>. In the available datasets, Invest NI lists details of all financial support it has offered companies that can then be freely examined across a number of parameters (including for example area).

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how her Department is supporting tourism initiatives in Omagh and to detail the amount of money spent in each of the last three years.

(AQW 385/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Tourism Northern Ireland delivers tourism initiatives across Northern Ireland to support the development of tourism and the marketing of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination to domestic NI visitors and visitors from Republic of Ireland.

Initiatives led by Tourism Northern Ireland which are open to all tourism businesses are outlined below including, where information is readily available, the uptake of these opportunities by businesses within the Omagh area:

Tourism Events Funding Programme:

Events Funding is available annually for all stakeholders to make applications thereto. The annual Tourism NI Tourism Events Funding programme consists of two schemes:

The International Tourism Events Fund to support homegrown international events; and

The National Tourism Events Sponsorship Scheme which is to support home grown national events.

In the last 3 years, six applications were received from the Omagh area and four were awarded funding of £47,000 as follows:

Year:	Applications received:	Awards:	Successful applicants:	Funding: (£)
2017/18	2	2	Bluegrass Festival An Creagan Midsummer Festival	10,000 10,000
2018/19	2	1	Bluegrass Festival	15,000
2019/20	2	1	Bluegrass Festival	12,000
Total:	6	4		47,000

Tourism NI Quality Grading Schemes:

This voluntary scheme offers tourism operators a chance to be awarded a star rating to indicate the level of quality a visitor can experience. Participation in the scheme assists operators to maintain and continually improve the quality of their offering.

There are 47 tourist accommodation businesses certified in Omagh, of which nine are graded through the Tourism NI Quality Grading Scheme.

There are two visitor attractions graded in Omagh through Tourism NI's Visitor Experience Quality Grading Scheme.

Capital Funding Programmes:

There has not been funding available for an open capital-funding programme for major tourism development since 2012. However, Tourism NI continues to work with key stakeholders to identify tourism development opportunities. Organisations who are interested in future capital programmes may register their interest at tds@tourismni.com.

In 2017 and 2018, Tourism NI launched small-scale immersive technology competitions to develop new visitor experiences. There were no applications from the Omagh area.

A small funding programme (Tourism NI Website Improvement Programme) opened in October 2019 and closed in December 2019. This programme aimed to support tourism experience providers to help enhance their websites to sell tourism experiences. In Omagh council area one experience provider applied to the scheme and was successful in receiving a digital audit and website improvement plan under the programme.

Experience Development:

In 2019, Tourism NI in collaboration with Arts Council for NI established a pilot initiative 'Embrace the Place' following an investment by Tourism NI and an open call for the best talent in the arts sector to create new innovative content to animate key tourism sites across Northern Ireland. 4 sites across Northern Ireland were selected including the Ulster American Folk Park. The objective of the programme was to unlock the potential of these key tourism and heritage sites. A partnership between the Ulster American Folk Park and Snowwater created "Folk Park Live!" which takes visitors on a musical journey through the site charting the stories of those who had to leave Ulster over the course of 300 years. A live performance from musicians filmed at 12 locations across the Ulster American Folk Park, has formed a QR code guided tour, through the old and new world parts of the UAFP. This £35k investment in "Folk Park Live!" has now resulted in a new permanent exhibition, a QR code guided tour of the Park, a Folk Park YouTube Channel and Spotify playlist and a piece of vinyl, which is available at the visitor centre.

Promotion & Marketing:

A range of marketing and promotional opportunities is also open to tourism businesses to promote their offering including a listing on Tourism NI's consumer website discovernorthernireland.com and associated social media channels. In 2019, the consumer website received over 3 million visits from tourists. A full range of the marketing and PR opportunities, including familiarisation trips, consumer campaigns and how to get involved is available on <https://tourismni.com/Grow-Your-Business/marketing/>.

Local Councils:

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (FODC), Derry City & Strabane District Council, Causeway Coast and Glens (CCG) and Mid Ulster (MU) are progressing with the Sperrins Future Search Programme, an initiative to develop a management structure and action plan for the Sperrins Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and which includes the Omagh area. The Councils now have allocated some budget to pay for a dedicated programme manager, who will be employed by DCSDC but available to progress the programme. Tourism NI will work closely with the partners on this programme.

Tourism NI works closely with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (FODC) across many of the above initiatives and to ensure alignment of local and regional tourism strategies.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the latest trading figures in respect of the Northern Ireland economy vis-a-vis trade with (i) Great Britain; (ii) Republic of Ireland; (iii) the other European Union member states; and (iv) the rest of the world.

(AQW 407/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The latest estimates of the value of sales of both goods and services, published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency show that, in 2018, sales to Great Britain (GB) were £10.6 billion, sales to the Republic of Ireland (RoI) were £4.2 billion, sales to the rest of the European Union (EU) were £2.5 billion and sales to the Rest of the World (RoW) were £4.5 billion.

Latest estimates of the value of goods and services purchased by Northern Ireland (NI) businesses show that, in 2017, purchases from GB were £13.3 billion, imports from the RoI were £2.6 billion, imports from the rest of the EU were £2.2 billion and imports from the RoW were £2.3 billion.

Further detail is available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/business-statistics/broad-economy-sales-and-exports-statistics>

HM Revenue & Customs also produce trade data for NI, but only in relation to international trade in goods. Latest estimates show that, in the year to September 2019, exports of to the RoI were £3.2 billion, exports to the rest of the EU were £2.2 billion and exports to the RoW were £3.8 billion. Over the same time period, imports from RoI were £2.2 billion, imports from the rest of the EU were £2.9 billion and imports from the RoW were £2.7 billion.

Further detail is available at: <https://www.uktradeinfo.com/Statistics/RTS/Pages/default.aspx>

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the impact on the local economy of the arrangements anticipated in the EU Withdrawal deal; and how she proposes to mitigate this impact.

(AQW 408/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There remains significant issues around the implementation of the Protocol and the UK's Future Economic Partnership with the EU that are yet to be decided. As such I cannot provide a definitive assessment of the impact on the local economy.

There is scope for action to mitigate any impacts. In particular, I will be pressing UK Government to deliver on its commitments to protect Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market. I will also be working alongside my Executive colleagues to ensure that measures to mitigate any impacts are brought forward.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the arrangements anticipated in the EU Withdrawal deal, to outline her proposals for (i) economic integration with Great Britain; and (ii) the avoidance of an all-Ireland economy.

(AQW 409/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Great Britain is by far our largest external market and I recognise the need to protect our trade with GB. I will be pressing UK Government to ensure that it meets the commitments made in New Decade, New Approach to guarantee unfettered access for Northern Ireland's businesses to the whole of the UK internal market, and to engage with the Executive on measures to protect and strengthen our place in the UK internal market.

It is important that Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland continue to co-operate on areas of mutual economic interest and strong links already exist in areas such as agri-food chains. However, Northern Ireland will remain in the UK internal market and UK customs territory and I have no plans for an all-Ireland economy.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to encourage Ulster University Coleraine Campus to add nursing degrees to their prospectus alongside Magee and Queen's University.

(AQW 417/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department provides funding and sets the strategic direction for the higher education sector. However, the universities are autonomous institutions responsible for the curriculum and location of the courses which they provide.

As regards nursing, while higher education falls within my remit, Nursing and Allied Health Professional courses are funded by the Department of Health.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her Department's proposals to increase broadband coverage in Foyle.

(AQW 428/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In line with the draft Programme for Government 2016 - 2021, my Department has developed Project Stratum to utilise the £150m additional broadband funding from the Confidence and Supply Agreement, together with a further £15m contribution from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, to improve internet connectivity for those premises across Northern Ireland currently unable to access broadband speeds of 30 Mbps or greater.

The project is at mid-procurement stage and, through this process, my Department will seek to maximise broadband coverage across the intervention area through the utilisation of the total £165m public funding, along with an anticipated industry contribution.

My Department published its response to an Open Market Review EU State aid public consultation on 16 December 2019, which confirmed the final intervention area for Project Stratum. Just over 97,000 premises across Northern Ireland have been identified as being eligible to benefit under this project, with 90% of the proposed intervention area being defined as rural.

The number and location of premises that will benefit will not be known until the procurement is complete and a contract has been awarded, expected in mid-2020.

It is anticipated, however, that not all premises within the intervention area will benefit. My Department continues to engage with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to explore how such premises will be addressed as expeditiously as possible on a national scale and in line with UK Government policy.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for the Economy what consideration her Department has given to the response from the Vocational Training Providers to the 2015 Skills to Succeed Consultation, which proposed the creation of a Central Service for Level 2 qualifications.

(AQW 442/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: "Securing Our Success" - The Northern Ireland Strategy on Apprenticeships, was published in June 2014; and "Generating Our Success" - The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Training, was published in June 2015, after extensive consultation with stakeholders, research and review of national and international best practice. The creation of a Central Service featured as a policy commitment in both Strategies.

My Department introduced an online portal 'Connect to Success NI' to support the establishment of a Central Service as envisaged by both Strategies. The Connect to Success work experience section went live in September 2016 and the apprenticeships section went live in June 2017.

Connect to Success NI, encourages employers to upload information about their work experience and apprenticeship opportunities, and users, including young people, parents and career teachers, can search for and view these opportunities via the online portal.

My Department will explore other features, as part of the wider development of the Central Service, to support and increase the participation of employers and apprentices.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for the Economy to detail whether any decision to proceed with changes to the Level 2 Traineeships will represent value for money.

(AQW 443/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is important that reforms to the vocational education system provide value for money. In addition, the reforms must establish flexible pathways that support young people to achieve their full potential across all Levels.

I will be working with my officials in the coming weeks to ensure this ambition is reflected in all the reform proposals.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for the Economy whether changes made to the Youth Traineeship, scheduled for September 2020, will make Further Education Colleges the exclusive provider for Level 2 qualifications.

(AQW 444/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Level 2 vocational qualifications are provided by a range statutory and non-statutory providers and are included as part of current vocational education funded by my Department through the employed ApprenticeshipsNI route, full-time Further Education and the full-time Training for Success programme.

It is essential that reforms to the wider vocational education and training landscape make the most of the full range of expertise across both the statutory and non-statutory sectors to ensure that we meet learner's needs.

In the coming weeks I will review the current plans for delivery of reforms to ensure they are as effective as possible.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the recent announcement from Crane Stockham Valve to close their site in East Belfast, to outline (i) what action her Department has taken, or plans to take, to support the company in

retaining the maximum number of staff possible at their smaller sites; and (ii) what support is being given to those not be retained to secure alternative employment.

(AQW 802/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Both my office and officials in Invest NI have been in liaison with Parent Company representatives and the local management team and have had an initial meeting to discuss this very regrettable announcement. Discussions are taking place around what exactly can be sustained in Northern Ireland and the potential opportunities for the remaining affected employees in terms of relocation to other sites. However these discussions are at a sensitive stage and it would be wrong to speculate on the outcomes at such an early stage.

A variety of support will be offered to those staff who will not be retained. Again discussions are at a sensitive stage however both my Department, Invest NI and the Department for Communities are ready to engage as and when necessary in relation to potential alternative employment opportunities for the workforce.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Ms Bunting asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to review the determination from the previous Independent Financial Review Panel to alleviate safety and security concerns with regard to lone working.

(AQW 526/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Independent Financial Review Panel ('the Panel') was established under Section 1 of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 ('the 2011 Act'). Section 2(1)(a) of the 2011 Act provides that the 'functions of the Panel are to make determinations as to...the salaries and allowances payable to members of the Assembly under section 47 of the 1998 Act'.

A Determination made under the provisions of the 2011 Act is a legal instrument made by a statutory body. As such, it is legally binding and the Assembly Commission has no authority to amend or ignore any of its provisions. Section 3(1) of the 2011 Act provides that "The Panel shall not, in the exercise of its functions, be subject to the direction or control of (a) the Assembly; or (b) the Commission". Therefore, the Assembly Commission has no authority to review the Determination made by the Panel. Indeed, section 2(3) of the 2011 Act requires the Panel (and not the Assembly Commission) to keep under review the extent to which its Determinations appear to be achieving the objectives prescribed in the 2011 Act.

Whilst the Assembly Commission has no power to review the Determination issued by the Panel, it is aware of the on-going concerns of Members regarding lone working and, in particular, the security and safety of their staff. To that end, guidance for Members and their staff is being prepared and will include advice on lone working and on practical security measures that can be taken especially in the constituency office setting.

The Assembly Commission is aware that specific training in relation to lone working was provided by Politics Plus in November 2018 and the Assembly Commission understands that Parties identified the continuing need for training of this type when discussions were taking place about the training plan for 2020.

In addition, Assembly Commission Members are being consulted on the provisions relating to the Panel before it commences the process to put a new Panel in place. The Assembly Commission will seek to gain consensus amongst Members for any necessary reforms of the system.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission (i) why the decision was taken to stop emailing answers to Assembly Written Questions to Members and their support staff; and (ii) whether the email service can resume.

(AQW 1032/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Members receive the answer to their written question directly from the Minister to whom the question has been submitted. Following this, the Business Office receives an electronic, text-only version of each answer for publication on the Assembly Information Management System (AIMS).

Members may elect, on request, to receive electronic copies of answers to their written questions via AIMS. To do this, Members should contact the Business Office to request this service, providing their preferred email address for this purpose.

During previous mandates, in 2011-16 and 2016-21, there were a number of Members who, having requested this service, received electronic copies of the answers to their written questions via AIMS. However, on dissolution of the Assembly in March 2016 and again in January 2017, all Members ceased to be Members and information and preferences held on AIMS for Members were deleted. This is in line with good practice and the eight principles of data protection as reflected in the Assembly's Data Protection policy.

The service providing Members with electronic answers to the written questions has not, therefore, been withdrawn. However, any Member wishing to receive this service needs to contact the Business Office to request it, even where it had been provided during previous mandates.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 7 February 2020

Written Answers

The Executive Office

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) when they expect to publish a first draft of the Programme for Government 2020 – 2022; (ii) whether they intend to publish an Executive work programme alongside the PfG; and (iii) how they plan to fulfil the aims and objectives within the PfG given the short time left in the current mandate.
(AQW 190/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): We are committed to establishing a strategic level, outcomes based Programme for Government (PfG) that delivers real and positive change in people's lives. Determining a way forward will be a key early priority for the Executive and we expect soon to publish details of the Executive's agreed approach to bringing forward a new and ambitious Programme.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have a shared vision for an all-Ireland economy.
(AQW 241/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The New Decade, New Approach document states:

"A top priority of the Executive will be to develop a regionally-balanced economy with opportunities for all. The Executive will invest strategically in ensuring that NI has the right mix of skills for a thriving economy. To boost the economy, the Executive will drive the delivery of essential infrastructure projects, including York Street Interchange, in order to build a Northern Ireland that is equipped for a prosperous shared future. The Executive will make it a priority to realise the economic potential offered by City Deals for the Belfast Region and Derry/Londonderry, including through match capital funding for infrastructure, regeneration and tourism projects. The Executive will work with the UK Government to develop and deliver the Growth Deals for Mid-South West Northern Ireland and Causeway Coast and Glens."

We recognise the importance to business of trade across the island. The NSMC appoint Board Members to Inter -Trade Ireland which helps SMEs across the island by offering potential cross-border business funding, intelligence and contacts.

In the New Decade, New Approach document the UK Government had made a number of financial and economic commitments to NI. The Irish Government has committed to greater connectivity by road, rail and air and investment in the North West and border counties.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the plans that are in place to bring forward a single equality bill in order to harmonise and simplify legislative equality protections whilst ensuring they are fit for purpose.
(AQW 264/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: There has been no agreement on a single Equality Bill; however, a number of statutes have been enacted here over the last decades which provide protection against discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, race, religion and political opinion, sex and sexual orientation.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) whether they have an agreed position on a regulatory and customs border in the Irish Sea as anticipated in the EU Withdrawal Bill; and (ii) what that position is.
(AQW 320/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: We recognise how important East/West access is to our businesses. Given the integrated nature of supply chains, it is also important to businesses in Ireland. The UK Government commitments in Annex A of the New Decade, New Approach Agreement include:

"...we will legislate to guarantee unfettered access for Northern Ireland's businesses to the whole of the UK internal market..."

This issue will be a key one for the new Executive to pursue in the months ahead.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister was acting in her official capacity in meeting the President of the European Commission in Dublin on 15 January 2020, she having tweeted that “as joint head of government” she was glad to meet the Commission president.

(AQW 410/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O’Neill: The deputy First Minister attended this event in her official capacity. Circumstances will arise where it is not possible for both of us to be present at an engagement but where its significance will warrant representation by the Executive.

Mr Allen asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) how they intend to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant as outlined in New Decade, New Approach; (ii) when they expect the process of appointing an Armed Forces Commissioner will commence; (iii) how they expect the appointment to be managed; (iv) who the commissioner will report to; and (v) what powers the commissioner will have.

[R]

(AQW 422/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O’Neill: The “New Decade, New Approach” deal specifies commitments contained in Annex A relating to the Armed Forces Covenant and the appointment of a Veterans’ Commissioner, and both will be incorporated into law at Westminster by the Government.

Mr Catney asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the future of the Maze Long Kesh site.

(AQW 426/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O’Neill: We recognise the potential of the Site and hope to find a resolution that will see the site developed.

Ms Bradshaw asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the Renewable Heating Initiative Inquiry, what discussions they have had with the Minister of Finance in relation to the reform of the Northern Ireland Civil Service to ensure that more specialist expertise is readily available for use.

(AQW 501/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O’Neill: We are committed to further reform of the Northern Ireland Civil Service as detailed in the ‘New Decade, New Approach Deal’ document. The Executive will discuss this in due course.

Mr Catney asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what actions their Department will take concerning the flying of flags.

(AQW 522/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O’Neill: The Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, established as part of the Fresh Start Agreement, was tasked with exploring a range of issues, including the flying of flags, and reporting to us. The Commission has not concluded its work.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much was spent by each Department on private finance initiative and public private partnership projects in each year since 2014; and how much is projected to be spent in 2020.

(AQW 649/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O’Neill: Expenditure on Private Finance Initiative (PFI) projects is set out in the table below. This information is included in data published annually by HM Treasury.

Dept	14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20*
DOJ	4.61	4.62	4.65	4.67	4.83	4.86
DOF	5.7	7	5.6	4.7	5.1	4.3
DFI	44.99	46.03	46.32	48.67	49.94	51.24
DE	84.63	84.92	85.63	78.57	79.64	78.96
DFC	0.44	0.45	0.46	0.48	0.44	0.49
HSC Trusts	35.9	35.01	35.26	36.15	37.87	38.7
Regional Colleges	29.37	29.56	29.83	30.14	30.34	30.51
NI Water	46.23	46.98	48.28	49.05	48.82	51.09

Figures (£m)

* projected figure

Public Private Partnership (PPP) is a non-specific term covering a broad range of contractual arrangements between the public and private sectors. PFI contracts are the only form of PPP for which this information is centrally recorded by the Department.

Ms S Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have to identify land, owned by their Department, that is suitable for the planting of trees, given that Northern Ireland is the second most deforested part of Europe. (AQW 659/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Tree planting is routinely considered as part of the economic regeneration of sites owned and overseen by the Department. However, we will consider other options and opportunities in due course.

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the total amount of the Social Investment Fund allocated to date; (ii) how much of the allocated money has been spent; and (iii) how many projects have been funded. (AQW 844/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: £87million has been allocated from the Social Investment Fund to a total of 65 projects across the 9 investment zones. Full details can be found on the TEO website at the following link:

www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/social-investment-fund

52 projects are now complete and spend to date totals £72.2million. The projects have made improvements to 91 premises and 45,000 people have benefitted from the range of interventions supported: over 5,000 through employment/training projects; over 28,000 through early intervention projects and over 12,000 through projects focused on education.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what are the terms of any protocol governing when each is on official business on behalf of the Executive Office when unaccompanied by the other. (AQW 880/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: When we separately undertake official engagements, we are at all times mindful of the requirement that our conduct of business should not undermine or compromise the performance of our joint statutory responsibilities.

Mr Middleton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an update on the development of the Ebrington Site in Londonderry; and (ii) to detail the current number of vacant buildings on the site. (AQW 980/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Significant progress has been made on the development of the Ebrington site with all buildings and land now subject to leases/development agreements or expressions of interest. Construction works for a new Grade A office accommodation, which will provide 50,000 sq ft (net) of office space accommodating between 400 and 450 people, have recently commenced. It is due to complete in Summer 2021 and will be a significant addition to the landmark site.

Further detail on the buildings, development lands and key infrastructure works on Ebrington can be found at the link below. <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/ebington-marketing-brochure.pdf>

Mr Easton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the former Minister for Employment and Learning ever raised the issue of a cap on backdated holiday pay for civil servants when he was Minister. (AQW 992/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: We would refer the Member to the public statement made by Mr Farry on 21 June 2019 in which he advised that he had not referred the matter of a payments cap to the Executive Committee when he was Minister for Employment and Learning.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they still seek the devolution of corporation tax. (AQW 1114/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: I refer the Member to the answer previously provided to Assembly Question, AQW 359/17-22.

Mr Newton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in supporting the work of the Minister for the Economy, to outline the regions they will prioritise in building international relationships in order to benefit the people of Northern Ireland. (AQO 10/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Enhancing our reputation and relationships internationally is an important element of the Programme for Government. Our priorities will continue to be in North America, Europe and China.

The three Executive offices in Washington, Brussels and Beijing play a significant part in promoting our international objectives. Equally, the international visit programme of Executive Ministers is important in establishing our position globally.

We will review our international relations strategy to ensure we are competitive in a changing international context – for example, we will need a new approach to engagement with the EU and Member States and regions as a result of Brexit.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on when the Programme for Government will be published.

(AQO 11/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: We are committed to bringing forward an outcomes based Programme for Government (PfG) that delivers real and positive change in people's lives. Determining a way forward will be a key early priority for the Executive and we expect soon to publish details of the Executive's agreed approach to bringing forward a new and ambitious Programme.

Mr Blair asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assurances they can give that the proposed framework contained in Annex E: Rights, Language and Identity of New Decade, New Approach will be fully inclusive of a wide range of societal groups, including ethnic minorities and the LGBT+ community.

(AQO 14/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Under the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement, we, supported by Junior Ministers in The Executive Office, will sponsor and oversee a new framework both recognising and celebrating Northern Ireland's diversity of identities and culture and accommodating cultural difference. This framework will be underpinned by the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, while fully acknowledging and accommodating those within our community who define themselves as 'other', and those from our ethnic communities and newcomer communities.

Consideration is currently being given to the detail of these arrangements to bring forward the Rights, Language and Identity proposals in Annex E of the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether there is any legislation in place to control engine idling for buses and commercial vehicles.

(AQW 470/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Department is not aware of any legislation in place in Northern Ireland to control engine idling for buses or commercial vehicles.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he intends to introduce a register of people (i) convicted of animal cruelty offences; and (ii) barred from keeping animals.

(AQW 524/17-22)

Mr Poots: I remain open to the possibility of creating a register of those convicted of animal welfare offences. However, responsibility for doing so is not entirely within my gift as conviction data is strictly controlled and managed by the Department of Justice.

The creation of such a register is very complex and would require data protection, human rights and prohibitive cost issues to be overcome. My officials have engaged with the Department of Justice on the matter and will continue to do so in order to explore if these issues could potentially be resolved.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether (i) the Supplementary Guidance for Anaerobic Digestion (published in 2013) is compliant with the Habitats Directive; and (ii) this been incorporated into the Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 531/17-22)

Mr Poots: The draft Supplementary Planning Guidance for Anaerobic Digestion was published for consultation and it remains in draft. If the draft guidance is finalised, the Department for Infrastructure will ensure that all relevant regulatory requirements will be considered. Notwithstanding the above, all planning applications that engage the requirements of the Habitats Regulations should be assessed against the relevant legislative provisions.

The Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland provides a moment-in-time review of waste management in Northern Ireland. It references this guidance in relation to planning considerations by local councils.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans he has to identify land, owned by his Department, that is suitable for the planting of trees, given that Northern Ireland is the second most deforested part of Europe.

(AQW 575/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department's Forest Service manages over 75,000 hectares of land of which 83% is currently under tree cover. Much of the unplanted land is managed primarily for bio-diversity due to its priority habitat status and open land requirements for sustainable forests.

I have asked my officials in Forest Service and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise to identify what scope exists to incorporate further woodland in their review of plans for forest and land management on the Department's estate.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will make a statement on his plans for farm support payments following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union.

(AQW 577/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have received confirmation that UK Government will provide the same financial support to CAP Pillar 1 for 2020 as for the 2019 Scheme Year. I am in the process of ensuring that I have the necessary legislative powers to make payments in the 2020 Scheme Year. The Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill was introduced to Parliament on 9 January to give governments across the UK powers to administer Direct Payments (Basic Payment, Greening Payment and Young Farmers' Payment) to farmers for the 2020 Scheme Year. The Northern Ireland Assembly agreed that its provisions should extend and apply to Northern Ireland on 27 January. This Bill is scheduled to become law by 31 January and will ensure continuity of support as we leave the EU. I plan to make an announcement in early February when all legislation is in place.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when his Department will issue letters of offer for the third tranche of the Environmental Farming Scheme.

(AQW 672/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is carrying out some further assessment of scheme uptake to confirm that the mix of options taken up so far, and those applied for in Tranche 3, will enable the environmental outcomes envisaged for the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) to be delivered.

The aim is to complete this further analysis and provide an update to stakeholders in the coming weeks.

As this assessment has resulted in a delay in the issuing of offers of EFS agreements, DAERA will give full consideration to granting additional time for works to be completed, taking seasonal issues into account. Stakeholders will be informed of this as required, once the outcome of the assessment is known.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the research on a possible relationship between the level of antibiotics given to pigs, poultry and dairy cattle and subsequently excreted in their waste, and the rising level of resistance to these drugs.

(AQW 728/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is not aware of any specific research currently being carried out in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK on the relationship between levels of antibiotics being administered to pigs, poultry and dairy cattle and the impact of their excreted waste on antimicrobial resistance (AMR) levels.

However, the 2016 O'Neill "Review on Antimicrobial Resistance", and the resultant NI 5-Year Action Plan "Changing the Culture 2019-2024; tackling antimicrobial resistance in NI" is based on various pieces of research from across the world.

This research has raised concerns around the increased risk of antimicrobial resistance that might arise from the contamination of the environment by waste from commercial activities, people and animals. Hence the NI Action Plan includes specific targets aimed at minimising the rate of increase of AMR through reducing contamination of the environment, for example by optimising the use of antimicrobials in all animals – domestic and agricultural.

Guidance on the handling of animal waste to reduce the spread of antibiotic resistant bacteria has also been made available to livestock keepers at - <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/handling-of-manure-and-slurry-to-reduce-antibiotic-resistance>.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what consideration is being given to use public funds to facilitate the proposed Islandmagee gas storage facility.

(AQW 744/17-22)

Mr Poots: The role of DAERA in relation to the Infrastrata project is as the licensing authority for the marine works, the abstraction licence and the discharge consent. No consideration has been given by DAERA to the provision of public funds to facilitate the project.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his Department's policy on permitting snares to be used on Forest Service land.

(AQW 767/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department does not use or permit the use of snares by 3rd parties on Forest Service land.

The Wildlife Order (Northern Ireland) 1985, as amended, requires that any use of snares is authorised by either the owner or occupier of the land.

Forest Service has not received any requests for the use of snares on its land for several years.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he intends to introduce regulations to improve the welfare of breeding sows.

(AQW 768/17-22)

Mr Poots: The welfare of all pigs, including breeding sows, is protected under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which affords a high degree of protection to all animals.

The Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 sets out further detailed requirements to safeguard the welfare of farmed animals, including pigs and sows in particular. In addition, the Code of Practice for pigs, which is published and reviewed as necessary by my Department, provides specific guidance in relation to the welfare of breeding sows, including group housing and farrowing.

Given that, I currently do not have any plans to introduce new legislation specifically for breeding sows.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of the importance of peatlands for the storage of carbon; and (ii) why his Department permits large-scale peat extraction.

(AQW 769/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) Peatland with semi-natural vegetation covers approximately 12% of the land area of Northern Ireland, accounting for 53% of the soil carbon pool. Peatlands represent an important carbon store and when in good condition, have the potential to absorb greenhouse gases from the atmosphere.
- (ii) The power to grant permission for large-scale peat extraction lies with Planning Authorities. My Department is a statutory consultee and provides advice to Planning Authorities in relation to planning applications for peat extraction. In relation to Department owned lands, peat extraction is limited to areas where there is a longstanding tradition and where rights or a lease have been previously established.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has plans to address problems relating to canine socialisation in day-care facilities.

(AQW 792/17-22)

Mr Poots: Canine day-care facilities in Northern Ireland are currently and effectively legislated for under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and the Animal Boarding Establishment Regulation (Northern Ireland) 1974.

Regarding the issue of canine socialisation in day-care in Northern Ireland, I am cognisant of modern day expectations for a wider range of facilities around animal boarding establishments and recent changes in legislation in England, so will give consideration to any proven need for amendments to our local legislation in this regard. In the meantime I remain committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland maintains its high welfare standards and the well-being of pets remains protected.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has plans to bring forward amendments to the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 to allow for the recent changes in how boarding kennels operate.

(AQW 793/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware of recent concerns raised by the Member regarding a dog boarding establishment in her constituency.

Comprehensive Departmental guidance on animal boarding establishments, which is based on the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and the Animal Boarding Establishments Regulations (NI) 1974, is available to all business operators.

I will, of course, take cognisance of the changing expectations of modern day animal boarding establishments with a view to giving consideration to any proven need for amendments to current legislation. I am committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland maintains its high welfare standards and that the well-being of pets remains protected.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has plans to bring forward amendments to The Animal Boarding Establishments Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1974 to allow for the recent changes in how boarding kennels operate.

(AQW 794/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware of recent concerns raised by the Member regarding a dog boarding establishment in her constituency.

Comprehensive Departmental guidance on animal boarding establishments, which is based on the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and the Animal Boarding Establishments Regulations (NI) 1974, is available to all business operators.

I will, of course, take cognisance of the changing expectations of modern day animal boarding establishments with a view to giving consideration to any proven need for amendments to current legislation. I am committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland maintains its high welfare standards and that the well-being of pets remains protected.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) what checks were carried out on the veracity of certificates issued by engineers as to the compliance of tanks built under the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme with relevant British Standards; and (ii), whether all had been checked as to being leak proof.

(AQW 795/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) All Chartered Engineers (Structural or Civil) involved in the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme were checked by the Department to confirm their chartered status was current. In addition, they were required to submit a typical tank design which a Chartered Structural Engineer reviewed for the Department to ensure their proposed design was compliant with the relevant British Standards, BS5502 and BS8007.
- (ii) During the scheme a sample number of each engineer's tanks were checked at a certain stage of construction to assess if the correct materials and processes were being used. The design engineers were also required to provide a certificate on completion of the tank for the farmer to notify the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. This notification confirmed that the engineer authorised the design and supervised the construction of the tank to the British Standards. The Department checked the tank dimensions as stated on the engineer's certificate on all prepayment inspections to confirm the certificate matched the specific tank being funded. These checks provided the Department with assurance that the tanks met the relevant standards and hence were structurally sound.
- (ii) The Department did not physically check if the tanks were leak proof. It was the responsibility of the farmer's Chartered Engineer to satisfy their client that the tank was constructed to their design specification.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many instances have there been of tanks constructed under the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme proving not to be leak proof.

(AQW 796/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Chartered Engineer employed by the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS) applicant was responsible for tank design and compliance with the legislation and British Standards relating to slurry tanks (BS5502) and the water retaining code (BS8007).

In addition, the relevant legislation at the time, the Silage Slurry and Agricultural Fuel Oil Regulations 2003, required all newly constructed tanks to be notified to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) 28 days before they were intended to be brought into use. Such notifications included a declaration by the Chartered Engineer that the tanks were built to the legislative requirements.

On receipt of the notification of any new slurry tank NIEA may undertake non-statutory site visits to check compliance with distance from watercourses, capacity, outlets and any obvious potential water pollution issues irrespective of whether the tanks were funded under the FNMS or not. It was not the role of these site visits to check the structural integrity of the tank, which is vouched for by the certification from a suitably qualified engineer which accompanies the notification.

Any incidents of allegedly leaking tanks, either reported or detected during planned farm inspections, would have been, and continue to be, investigated by NIEA. How a tank's construction was funded is not part of the NIEA investigation. Therefore, data on how many instances there have been of tanks constructed under the FNMS that have leaked has not been collated by the Department and is not available.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme, (i) how did his Department ensure that all constructed tanks complied with the relevant requirements of BS 5502 and BS 8007; and (ii) were all tanks checked to ensure they were leak proof.

(AQW 797/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) All tanks that were funded under the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme were designed by the applicants Chartered Engineer (Civil or Structural). All engineers were required to submit a copy of their tank design to the Department. These were reviewed by a Chartered Structural Engineer who advised the Department of its compliance to the relevant British Standards, BS5502 and BS8007.
- (ii) The Department then carried out inspections on a sample number of tanks during construction to assess if the materials and processes being used were in accordance with those engineers specifications. These inspections included at least one inspection for every engineer involved in the scheme.
- (ii) The design engineers were also required to provide a certificate on completion of the tank for the farmer to notify the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. This notification confirmed that the engineer authorised the design and supervised the construction of the tank to the British Standards. These procedures outlined assured the Department that the tanks were designed and constructed to the correct standards. It was the responsibility of the design engineer to check the tanks were leak proof.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he will take to ensure advertising carried on public transport is not deemed to be prejudicial against the agriculture industry.

(AQW 808/17-22)

Mr Poots: This is a commercial matter for Translink.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans he has for improving animal welfare standards in agriculture.

(AQW 809/17-22)

Mr Poots: Welfare standards for all farmed animals are protected and enforced by my Department under The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the 2011 Act) and The Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012.

In addition, my Department has published six codes of practice for farmed animals, which provide practical guidance regarding owning and keeping a particular species. Each code is based on the five needs of animals, as set out in the 2011 Act and is reviewed and revised as necessary. All herd or flock keepers are expected to be familiar with and adhere to the requirements and standards set out in these documents.

I am keen to ensure that Northern Ireland remains at the forefront of welfare standards; however, I have no plans to introduce new legislation at this point in time.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to detail his plans for growth in organic agriculture; and (ii) whether he will make a statement on this matter.

(AQW 811/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) To assist with growth of the organic sector, my Department offers support for the conversion and management of land to certified organic standards through the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS).

After two tranches, the EFS is supporting conversion of 510 ha of land, and management of 2,200 ha of land, to certified organic standards under the Organic Conversion and Management options respectively.

- (ii) Growth of organic agriculture will depend on market demand for organic produce. Organic NI is the representative group for local producers, which was formed in 2013, and my Department will continue to liaise with Organic NI on development of the sector.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he intends to call a public inquiry into the illegal waste site at Mobuoy Road.

(AQW 867/17-22)

Mr Poots: I refer you to my previous response to AQW 746/17-22.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an outline on what success with authorities in the Republic of Ireland his Department has had in obtaining recompense in respect of the dumping of illegal waste in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 877/17-22)

Mr Poots: A Framework Agreement between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland was signed in 2009 to repatriate to the Republic of Ireland an estimated 200,000 m³ of waste from 17 legacy sites where waste had been dumped illegally. Repatriation began in 2010 with the latest repatriation taking place in February 2016. About half the waste has been repatriated with a contribution of around £2m from the Republic of Ireland.

In the last 5 years the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has investigated 5 sites linked with waste originating in the Republic of Ireland. No repatriation has resulted so far.

Since March 2017, NIEA has successfully repatriated 5 waste shipments to the Republic of Ireland which were still in transit.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on (i) actions taken; (ii) actions yet to be taken; (iii) costs involved; (iv) costs presently budgeted for; and (v) the anticipated timescales for clearance in respect of all identified illegal waste dumping sites.

(AQW 878/17-22)

Mr Poots: Cases of illegal waste disposal covering the period 2002 to 2016 have been subject to an initial evaluation by NIEA following recommendations from the Mills Review 2013. The results were as follows:

In 171 cases, the waste has been removed voluntarily or in response to an enforcement notice issued by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) as it seeks to apply the Polluter Pays Principle.

For 309 sites it was identified that the waste had not been removed or the site remediated. NIEA has taken forward a project to undertake a strategic risk based approach for assessing these sites using a two staged approach; the first stage involved

examining the existing site information to establish the presence of pollutant linkages and prioritise the sites. The first stage is complete.

67 sites have been identified for further consideration and work is ongoing to develop the next stage of this project to assess what further work is required. This will include consideration of timescales and potential costs associated with remediation. Any decisions to remediate these sites will include options to ensure, where feasible, the Polluter Pays principle is applied. It is likely that remediation may involve the use of public funds in those cases rated as high risk and where it is not feasible to enforce the polluter pays principle.

Work to date has focussed on using current NIEA resources.

At present no budget has been set for the next phase of the project.

At present no timescales have been set for the next phase of the project.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) what has been done to address the issues at waste site on Mobuoy Road, County Londonderry; and (ii) when will all the illegal waste be removed.

(AQW 879/17-22)

Mr Poots: From 2012 when the Department became aware of the extent of illegal waste at the site, a number of measures have been taken to address related issues. These include:

- Suspension of all waste activities at the site;
- Revoking operators licences;
- Removal of controlled waste and leachate from the surface of the site;
- Engineering works to remove direct linkages from polluted water bodies on the site to the River Faughan;
- Issuing enforcement notices;
- Instigation of criminal and civil action to remediate the site and recover costs; and
- Commissioning the Mills review and implementation of recommendations.

The Department also continues to undertake an extensive programme of ground investigation and environmental risk assessments to ensure that the public drinking water supply remains safe and to inform the development of a final remediation strategy.

The Remediation of Mobuoy is a large complex project with a number of cross cutting issues. Options for a final remediation strategy are currently under consideration. As such, it is difficult to provide a definitive timeline for the remediation of the site. Current planning assumptions are that work will commence on site late 2022.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what consideration will he give to the introduction of an animal cruelty register.

(AQW 890/17-22)

Mr Poots: I remain open to the possibility of creating a register of those convicted of animal welfare offences. However, responsibility for doing so is not entirely within my gift as conviction data is strictly controlled and managed by the Department of Justice (DOJ).

The creation of such a register is complex, requiring data protection, human rights and prohibitive cost issues to be overcome. My officials have engaged with the DOJ on the matter and will continue to do so in order to explore if these issues can potentially be resolved.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what consideration his Department will give to revising the terms of the Animal Welfare (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 to increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty offences.

(AQW 892/17-22)

Mr Poots: The penalties for animal welfare offences in Northern Ireland were increased in 2011 and again in 2016 following a review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

As a result, the maximum penalties available to the courts in Northern Ireland are amongst the most stringent in the British Isles and other jurisdictions of the UK are currently increasing the penalties available there to bring them into line with those available in Northern Ireland. My Department has no plans to further increase the penalties available in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with the UK Government regarding (i) countryside policies following Brexit; and (ii) the future of financial support currently available to farmers from the European Union.

(AQW 896/17-22)

Mr Poots: Countryside policy falls within devolved competence and I will be developing a new local policy that best meets the future needs of the Northern Ireland.

I have already received confirmation that UK Government will provide the same financial support to CAP Pillar 1 for 2020 as for the 2019 Scheme Year.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on a strategy to address (i) littering; and (ii) dog fouling.

(AQW 938/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department's vision is "a living, working, active landscape, valued by everyone." Those who engage in littering or allow dog fouling cannot be said to be valuing our landscape. The Department introduced legislation in the form of the Clean Neighbourhoods & Environment Act (NI) 2011, which allows councils to issue fixed penalty notices of up to £80 in cases of litter, and between £50 to £80 for dog fouling offences. Where the case is dealt with by the courts, a fine of up to £2,500 can be imposed for littering offences, and £1,000 for dog fouling offences. The Department is continuing to keep these under review.

In addition to the robust legislation, which allows the councils to tackle litter offences when they occur, the Department is also strongly committed to, and actively works towards, reducing the number of littering offences in Northern Ireland through:

Substantial funding which has previously been provided to support educational and promotional campaigns to achieve behavioural change (over £3million since 2007/8);

Additional current funding of just over £1 million which has been committed through the Environment Fund to further support these educational and promotional campaigns;

The Carrier Bag Levy which has significantly reduced the number of bags dispensed in Northern Ireland (around 1 billion fewer bags issued in Northern Ireland since the levy was introduced in April 2013);

A consultation on the introduction of a Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers which finished on 13 May 2019;

Support and funding provided to community projects working towards the improvement of their local environment.

The Department is fully aware that litter prevention is very much an ongoing issue and while recent studies, such as the Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report 2017/18, indicate an improvement (12% of sites litter-free compared to just 7% the previous year), there is much work to be done to improve the state of our environment. As part of this ongoing work, I will be speaking at the launch of the first ever Northern Ireland 'Litter Compositional Analysis' (funded by the Department) which will take place later this month.

In parallel, my Department is working towards a new Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland which will seek to deliver the Department's vision of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone. A Public Discussion on the proposed Strategy was launched on 18 September 2019 and closed on 5 February 2020. The responses are currently under review, and will be used to shape Northern Ireland's first ever Environment Strategy. This strategy will play a key role in setting Northern Ireland's environmental priorities for the coming decades.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail Forestry Service (i) staff in post figures in Dundonald House prior to relocation to Enniskillen; and (ii) staff in post figures in Enniskillen following relocation.

(AQW 949/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA Forest Service Headquarters relocated from Dundonald House to Inishkeen House, Enniskillen in September 2015.

Prior to relocation to Enniskillen there were 59 Forest Service staff located in Dundonald House.

Following relocation there were 47 Forest Service staff located in Inishkeen House, Enniskillen, 39 of these were in posts that had relocated from Dundonald House.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to deliver on a public inquiry into illegal dumping that was agreed by the Assembly in 2014.

(AQW 971/17-22)

Mr Poots: I refer you to my previous response to AQW 746/17-22.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how many sites remain to be designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest; and (ii) when he anticipates that the designation process will be completed.

(AQW 1002/17-22)

Mr Poots: On the basis of an earlier review, approximately 50 potential ASSIs remain to be designated. However, this requires periodic review to ensure the designated network adequately safeguards our most valuable nature. This, in addition to other competing work pressures, means it is not possible to provide a completion date for the programme.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to list all restoration orders imposed on landowners who have damaged or destroyed Sites of Special Scientific Interest, since 2007.

(AQW 1003/17-22)

Mr Poots: The decision to impose a restoration order rests with the courts, following a conviction of an offence under Article 46(1), (2), (3) (6) or (6A) of the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002. My Department is not aware of any restoration orders being imposed since 2007.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the circumstances when Forest Service permits its land to be used for the setting of snares.
(AQW 1004/17-22)

Mr Poots: Forest Service generally does not permit the use of snares on its land. It may however consider on a case by case basis, requests to use snares in very exceptional circumstances.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to farmers delivering the Farm Family Key Skills scheme, whether his Department will (i) pay for the hire of the hall; and (ii) provide public liability insurance for the group using the hall.
(AQW 1093/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department engages external training providers to deliver courses under the key themes for the Farm Family Key Skills (FFKS) Scheme. They are appointed on a cost per course basis through the public procurement process. The cost per course includes the cost of hiring and / or providing premises for the delivery of the courses. It is a requirement that premises used as FFKS training venues, and not the training providers, have public liability insurance of at least £1 million and that the venue provides the appropriate level of insurance. The training provider must supply a copy of a current original venue insurance certificate to my Department before payment for delivery of the training course is approved.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) what assessment has been made of the market for locally grown willow; and (ii) how does this assessment fit with his Department's encouragement of willow planting.
(AQW 1117/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has made no assessment recently about the market for locally grown short rotation coppice (SRC) willow. Support for SRC planting was made available between 2004 and 2013 under the Department's Rural Development Programme and required applicants to assess their local market and demonstrate that there was a local energy end use for their crop. Further support for SRC planting was considered no longer a priority under the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme because the market for SRC willow had developed sufficiently, however it may be eligible for support under the Basic Payment Scheme as a permanent agricultural crop for energy production.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline any plans he has to increase the area of land used for tree planting.
(AQW 1162/17-22)

Mr Poots: I recognise that tree cover in Northern Ireland is significantly lower than in other parts of the UK. I have asked my senior Departmental team to develop plans to increase the rate of afforestation to address this.

More tree cover will play an important role in mitigating the challenge of climate change and provide increased opportunities for environmental, social and economic benefits to be gained from forests and woodlands.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 591/17-22, what is the current ammonia emissions level.
(AQW 1163/17-22)

Mr Poots: The National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory published figures for air pollutant inventories for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland: 1990-2017 on 4 October 2019. These figures estimate total ammonia emissions for Northern Ireland to be 33.9 kilotonnes (kt) in 2017. Agriculture accounted for 32.6 kt, transport sources accounted for 0.18 kt, waste accounted for 0.26 kt and other sources accounted for 0.84 kt.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) his plans for a future Rural Development Programme (RDP), in particular a Farm Business Improvement Scheme which was part of the previous RDP; and (ii) whether (a) he has plans to introduce a successor to Tier 2; and (b) he can detail a timeline for any future programme.
(AQW 1224/17-22)

Mr Poots: Thank you for your question about the Rural Development Programme and the Farm Business Improvement Scheme.

Given that we have now left the EU, the UK will not be part of the next Rural Development Programming period (2021-2027).

Work is underway in my Department to develop an agricultural policy framework that will meet the future needs of the Northern Ireland industry. That work involves a number of policy projects including one on future capital support. It is

important that this work is supported by engagement with the industry and stakeholders and my Department will be consulting on different aspects of the framework in the future.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 592/17-22, to outline the expected (i) timeframe; and (ii) budget for further upgrades.

(AQW 1246/17-22)

Mr Poots: Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (FODC) expect to complete the visitor amenity centre, additional mountain bike trails and extended walking trails before the end of 2020.

My Department has offered financial support of £500,000 to FODC to match fund their contribution of at least £500,000 towards these upgrades.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what support his Department can provide to the egg industry, based on the concerns raised in the research report Competitiveness of the UK Egg Sector, Base Year 2018.

(AQW 1314/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware of the findings of this research. The report illustrates the importance of future trading relationships post EU Exit. I will be fully engaged with the UK Government on these issues and will be emphasising the need to ensure that future free trade agreements, both with the EU and other countries take account of the needs of the egg sector. The UK has high welfare and environmental standards and of course we wish to maintain this. This will be reinforced to those countries that import into the UK. It is important that the competitiveness of the egg sector is maintained.

My Department has and continues to support the commercial egg sector in Northern Ireland through the Farm Business Improvement Scheme and the provision of scientific research, training and Knowledge and Technology Transfer programmes.

The Farm Business Improvement Scheme (FBIS) is a package of measures aimed at improving the competitiveness and sustainability of the farming sector. Under the two tranches of Tier 1 of the Capital Scheme, a number of items were supported that would specifically assist the egg industry. Under the first tranche of Tier 2 of the Capital Scheme, almost £7M has been committed to either current egg producers or those diversifying into egg production.

The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) currently supports the poultry industry in Northern Ireland through the Knowledge Advisory Service. At present there are six Business Development Groups supported by a CAFRE Poultry Adviser, three of which are based within the commercial egg production sector. These groups are also supported by a CAFRE Poultry Environmental Adviser.

CAFRE meets regularly with industry representatives from the NI Poultry Federation group to discuss how CAFRE can support the needs of the sector, particularly in relation to training of existing and prospective producers.

As part of the Farm Innovation Programme, a scheme within the Rural Development Programme, CAFRE has delivered two study trips to England for NI commercial egg farmers specifically to look at innovation technologies.

My Department is also currently funding a number of AFBI-led research projects to benefit the poultry sector in NI, including the egg industry.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will commit to legislating for a climate change act within the current Assembly mandate.

(AQW 1481/17-22)

Mr Poots: I refer you to my previous response to AQW 308/17-22.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans he has to provide clarity on permitted ammonia levels for individual farm businesses.

(AQO 26/17-22)

Mr Poots: Permitted ammonia levels are not currently defined for individual farm businesses in Northern Ireland. However, a threshold-based approach is applied in the Department's protocol for assessing potential impacts of nitrogen and ammonia on sensitive habitats. This protocol is used for informing permitting decisions for intensive farms and for providing advice to planning authorities.

The Department has been reviewing this approach and I am engaging with officials on this priority work area to develop a profitable farming sector and protect the environment.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how he plans to address the issue of mental health in farming and rural communities.

(AQO 22/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am currently supporting initiatives to address the issue of mental health in farming and rural communities, through the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Programme.

The Rural Support charity which operates a telephone Helpline and signposting service for farmers and rural dwellers in stress. Their volunteers support clients with a range of issues pertaining to farming matters and stress. Rural Support are currently delivering awareness training workshops entitled 'Coping With The Pressures of Farming', funded by Farm Family Key Skills Programme.

The Farm Families Health Checks Programme has screened the physical and mental health and well-being of 20,000 individuals since 2012, primarily farmers, farm workers and farm family members attending marts and community events.

The SPRING Social Prescribing project which is delivered in partnership with eight rural Healthy Living Centres aims to link medical care to non-clinical locally delivered support services by enabling medical professionals to refer rural patients to a range of activities and services.

Looking forward, a new Rural Policy Framework is being developed, to shape future rural priorities and includes a draft goal 'to reduce loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of rural isolation and to promote the health and well-being of rural dwellers'.

This framework will provide the basis for DAERA to work with other departments, public bodies and the community and voluntary sector going forward to ensure that actions are taken to address the issue of mental health in farming and rural communities.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the review of the Environmental Farming Scheme.

(AQO 27/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is carrying out some further assessment of scheme uptake to confirm that the mix of options taken up so far, and those applied for in Tranche 3, will enable the environmental outcomes envisaged for the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) to be delivered.

The aim is to complete this further analysis and provide an update to stakeholders in the coming weeks.

As this assessment has resulted in a delay in the issuing of offers of EFS agreements, DAERA will give full consideration to granting additional time for works to be completed, taking seasonality issues into account. Stakeholders will be informed of this as required, once the outcome of the assessment is known.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail how he will address the issue of Bovine TB and work with the agri-food sector and his counterparts in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland to implement a way forward.

(AQO 25/17-22)

Mr Poots: The development of a Northern Ireland bTB Eradication Strategy has involved the participation of the many stakeholders from within our agri-food sector. I would like to thank of all those who have contributed to date, in particular the members of the TB Strategic Partnership Board (TBSPG) which led this engagement process.

Following the public consultation on the Department's response to the TBSPG's proposals in late 2017/early 2018, my Department has now developed recommendations across six thematic areas. These aim to tackle holistically the wide range of factors which contribute to the persistence of this costly disease and have drawn from best practice throughout these islands, while also taking into account the characteristics of our own farming landscape.

To this end, my officials regularly engage with colleagues in Defra and the other devolved administrations to share best practice. Indeed, last Wednesday, my officials attended the UK TB Liaison Group meeting in Cardiff. Officials from the Republic of Ireland were also in attendance and gave a presentation on their efforts to control bTB in the wildlife population.

In implementing our bTB Strategy, I will continue to draw on the experience of our neighbours to ensure that measures we put in place reflect the best practice available.

Once I have had an opportunity to review the recommendations, my officials will work with the agri-food sector and other stakeholders through the TB Stakeholders Working Group to take them forward. Some proposals will be subject to public consultation, and the TB Eradication Partnership will have an important role in working with industry to take forward some of the recommendations.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his plans to review the licensing of boarding kennels.

(AQO 24/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is responsible, under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and the Animal Boarding Establishments Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1974, for licensing animal boarding premises, including boarding kennels, in Northern Ireland.

While this legislation is still considered fit for purpose, I am aware that new legislation has recently been introduced in England to specifically regulate "doggy day care" and "home boarding".

I therefore intend to take cognisance of what is happening in England with a view to considering a way forward for Northern Ireland.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given the impact Bovine TB is having on the bovine population, whether the Minister will give an assurance he will make this issue a priority.

(AQO 23/17-22)

Mr Poots: Bovine Tuberculosis is one of the most significant animal health challenges faced by both industry and government here, and I can assure the member that tackling bTB is one of my top priorities.

In the last financial year, the Northern Ireland bTB Programme cost just over £40M, with nearly £24M of this amount being paid in compensation to farmers.

However, I am pleased to report that bTB disease levels have fallen by around 18% since peaking in November 2017. This decline has occurred since additional testing measures were introduced at the start of 2018. As a result of this improvement, my Department now estimates the cost of the bTB Programme in 2019/20 to be in the region of £36M.

While this is encouraging, more must be done. Over the past number of years, considerable work has taken place to develop a new bTB Eradication Strategy for Northern Ireland. I will consider the Strategy proposals over the next few months, with a view to implementing them as soon as possible.

We must make every effort to tackle this endemic disease which is so costly to both herd owners and the public purse. Having robust measures in place will also be essential to securing future trading relationships, both with the European Union and beyond. To this end I look forward to working in partnership with the farming community, and other stakeholders, to address bovine Tuberculosis in Northern Ireland.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has plans to review the funding for Areas of Natural Constraint.

(AQO 21/17-22)

Mr Poots: Funding for Areas of Natural Constraint (ANC) (also known as the Severely Disadvantaged Area or SDA) was subject to a review and consultation, initiated by Minister O'Neill, in 2016. This review looked at the range of area based support schemes that supported farmers in the ANC, including the Basic Payment Scheme, greening payments and the ANC Scheme. Following completion of that consultation my predecessor, Minister McIlveen, took the decision to extend an ANC Scheme for a final year by approving the ANC Scheme 2018.

Given that we have now left the EU I have an opportunity to review funding for the entire sector. I am looking forward to developing a new policy framework for agricultural support that is shaped to the specific needs of the local industry.

Department for Communities

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Riverine Project.

(AQW 301/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): In June 2019 the Riverine Community Park project was awarded £7.59m under Action 3.1 (Shared Spaces Capital Development) of the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (PEACE IV 2014-20).

Delivery of the project is led by Donegal County Council in partnership with Derry City & Strabane District Council. A Project Board has been established to progress the project, with the latest meeting held on 16th January 2020.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail all departmental budgetary pressures.

(AQW 322/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department to work to manage its affairs within its current budget.

Engagement however is ongoing between officials in my department (and others) and officials in the Department of Finance on the key budgetary challenges we face in future years. This engagement will inform subsequent Executive consideration of the wider public expenditure environment and enable the Executive to focus on addressing only the most significant budget issues.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) whether a new consultation process is required to commence the (a) Regional; and (b) Sub-Regional Stadia Programmes; and (ii) the required budget for both programmes.

(AQW 323/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

- (a) The Regional Stadia Programme commenced in 2011 and has progressed with the successful completion of the Kingspan Stadium in 2014 and Windsor Park Stadium in 2016. The Ulster Council of the GAA (UCGAA) completed a 36-week community consultation in 2016 to support its Planning Application. No further consultation is planned.
- (b) The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” Agreement. A 12-week consultation on the Programme, based on an Irish Football Association (IFA) Facilities Strategy dated 2011, took place from 30 November 2015 closing on 22 February 2016. Given that there have been a number of changes to the football landscape in that time I have asked my officials to engage with key stakeholders on the Programme with a view to moving it forward.

In March 2011, the Department was allocated a budget of £110 million of grant funding by the Executive to deliver the Regional Stadia Programme. The Executive also endorsed a £36.2 million budget to deliver the Sub Regional Stadia Programme.

The delays impacting the redevelopment of Casement Park have impacted the budget and the current project cost estimate is in the region of £162 million.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities whether she will amend the eligibility criteria to make the Affordable Warmth Scheme more accessible by increasing the income threshold for the scheme and that Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payment, Carer’s Allowance and Attendance Allowance be excluded from the calculation of income; and, if so, when this work will begin.

(AQW 396/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The DfC carried out a public consultation between 17th November 2017 and 16th February 2018 into proposed changes to the Affordable Warmth Scheme. The DfC proposed to raise the income threshold to £23,000 for households with more than one adult and reducing it to £18,000 for all single person households. It further proposed that Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance, Personal Independence Payment and Carer’s Allowance are not included in the calculation of income for the Affordable Warmth Scheme.

The consultation found significant support for both these proposals. I will consider the findings of the consultation and make a decision on the implementation of the proposals by the end of February 2020.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) people who are homeless, broken down by age; (ii) people in housing stress, broken down by age; (iii) people living in hostel accommodation; (iv) single people requiring accommodation; and (v) average points required to obtain a house, in the Mid Ulster constituency.

(AQW 451/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The number of people who are homeless, broken down by age in the Mid Ulster constituency.

Table 1 provides a list of the number of Applicants that are currently registered as Full Duty Applicants (FDA) on the Waiting list with their 1st preference area of choice Common Landlord Area (CLA) in the Mid Ulster Constituency broken down by age categories.

Table 1: FDA Applicants by Age Category Mid Ulster

Age Category	No. Applicants
18 - 25 Yrs (inc. Under 18s)	69
26 - 29 Yrs	42
30 - 39 Yrs	106
40 - 49 Yrs	79
50 - 59 Yrs	70
60 - 64 Yrs	15
65+ Yrs	51
Total	432

The number people in housing stress, broken down by age in the Mid Ulster constituency.

The following figures in Table 2 below are the number of Applicants currently registered on the Waiting list and classified as being in Housing Stress with their 1st preference area of choice Common Landlord Area (CLA) in the Mid Ulster Constituency and broken down by age categories.

Table 2: Applicants in Housing Stress by Age Category(Mid Ulster)

	Age Category	No. Applicants
	Housing Stress (30 + Pts)	18 - 25 Yrs (inc. Under 18s)
26 - 29 Yrs		57
30 - 39 Yrs		137
40 - 49 Yrs		110
50 - 59 Yrs		96
60 - 64 Yrs		38
65+ Yrs		87
Total		628

The number of people living in hostel accommodation in the Mid Ulster constituency.

The Housing Executive has advised that as of Tuesday 21st January 2020 there were a total of 26 households who have been placed in hostel accommodation by the Housing Executive in the Mid Ulster area.

The number of single people requiring accommodation in the Mid Ulster constituency.

There are 427 Applicants currently registered on the Waiting List as Single Person households with their 1st preference area of choice Common Landlord Area (CLA) in the Mid Ulster Constituency.

The average points required to obtain a house, in the Mid Ulster constituency.

Table 3 details the number of Allocations from 01/01/19 to 31/12/19 and 01/01/15 - 31/12/19 by Mid Ulster Parliamentary Constituency, set by the Mean & Median Points at the Point of Allocation. 01/01/15 – 31/12/19 allocations are provided in order to give a better understanding of allocations over time.

Table 5: Allocations Mid Ulster by Mean/Median Point Level

Allocations 01/01/19 to 31/12/19			Allocations 01/01/15 - 31/12/19		
No.	Mean Points at the Point of Allocation	Median Points at the Point of Allocation	No.	Mean Points at the Point of Allocation	Median Points at the Point of Allocation
233	115.5	130.0	1070	108.8	120.0

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to provide the projected costs for welfare mitigation payments during (i) 2020/21; and (ii) 2021/22.

(AQW 514/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The forecasted costs for continuing to deliver the existing welfare mitigation schemes are:

- (i) In 2020/21 an estimated £40.4m
- (ii) In 2021/22 an estimated £40.4m

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities when the boiler replacement scheme will recommence.

(AQW 544/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Boiler Replacement Scheme commenced in 2012 and has run continuously since. Demand for the scheme continues to be high and additional funding of £450k on top of the opening £1m budget was allocated to the scheme during the current financial year, 2019/20.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to identify land, owned by her Department, that is suitable for the planting of trees, given that Northern Ireland is the second most deforested part of Europe.

(AQW 574/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Housing, Urban Regeneration and Local Government (HURLG) has acquired land and buildings in designated areas over the years through its regeneration powers for the purpose of redevelopment by the private, public and community sectors.

In order to continue to deliver regeneration and meet key priorities of the Departmental Business Plan a review of the Department's property/land holdings including an exercise to categorise and assess how they can best be utilised is currently underway. The outcome of this review will assist the Department to consider how best to deploy the Department's land holdings responsibly in the public interest.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the planned (i) current; and (ii) future projects in West Tyrone which will be (a) fully; and (b) part funded by her Department.
(AQW 593/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department's planned (i) current projects in West Tyrone are summarised in the table below.

Table (i)

Project	Fully Funded Yes (Y)	Part Funded Yes (Y)
Lismore Park, Sion Mills 'Housing for All' Shared Housing Scheme - Rural Housing Association		Y
Woodside Avenue, Omagh 'Housing for All' Shared Housing Scheme - Apex Housing Association		Y
Property at Melvin Court, Strabane (Social Housing)		Y
Pinefield Avenue, Omagh (Social Housing)		Y
Property at Ardnalee Park, Strabane (Social Housing)		Y
Omagh Vacated School Sites Disposal Strategy - DfC/DE/ Fermanagh and Omagh District Council		Y
Omagh Revitalisation – High St, Market Street and Georges Street - Fermanagh and Omagh District Council		Y
St Lucia Barracks – Omagh - Strategic Outline Business case	Y	
The Riverine Community Park Shared Space Project. Strabane & Lifford - EU PEACE IV Project – Donegal County Council lead partner in partnership with Derry City & Strabane District Council		Y
Property at Newpark Road, Tummery, Dromore, Omagh, Co Tyrone – Listed Building – Historic Environment Division		Y
Technical Assistance - Derry City & Strabane District Council - Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal	Y	
Ethnic Community Project - Strabane Ethnic Community Association	Y	
Salary Costs - Full time Co-Ordinator -Strabane Community Unemployed Group	Y	
Project Co-Ordinator & Part-Time Finance/Administrator Salaries - Strabane Community Project	Y	
Uniting Neighbourhood Renewal Communities Melmount & East Bank Estates Community Associations Forum	Y	
Support and Treatment Programme for those Marginalised through Drugs and Alcohol - HURT(Have Your Tomorrows) - Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Areas	Y	
The Provision of Counselling, Psychotherapy and Psychosocial Support to Beneficiaries of the Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Areas The Koram Centre, Counselling, Psychotherapy and Psycho Social Support Ltd - Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Areas	Y	
Project Co-Ordinator's Salary/ENIC & Running Costs - Lisnafin/Ardnalee/ Trust Cross Community Development Association - Strabane	Y	
Project Co-Ordinator Delivering for a Better Ballycolman - Strabane Sigersons GAA	Y	
Strabane Educational Support Programme -Holy Cross College	Y	

Project	Fully Funded Yes (Y)	Part Funded Yes (Y)
Project Co-Ordinator's Salary/ENIC & Running Costs - Fountain Street Community Development Association, Strabane	Y	
Going Places Programme in the Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal - South West College	Y	
Neighbourhood Health Improvement programme – Western Health & Social Care Trust	Y	
Generalist Advice – Derry City & Strabane District Council	Y	
Community Investment Fund – FOCUS	Y	
Social Supermarket Pilot - Strabane Community Project	Y	
Strabane Social Supermarket - Strabane Community Project	Y	
Voluntary Infrastructure Programme Support -Omagh Volunteer Centre	Y	
Welfare Reform Support Project – Omagh Independent Advice Services	Y	
Strathroy Afterschool and Homework Club Strathroy Community Association, Omagh		Y
Omagh NRA Technical Assistance & Employment of Co-Ordinator – Fermanagh and Omagh District Council		Y
Omagh Learning Mentor – Education Authority West	Y	
Omagh Health & Wellbeing Programme – Western Health & Social Care Trust		Y
Campsie Community Hub – Supporting Communities - Omagh	Y	
Celebration of Sport event at Omagh Leisure Complex - DfC Sports Branch	Y	
Together Building United Communities (TBUC) - Uniting Opportunities grant - Social Cycle Project - Derg Valley Care, Castleberg	Y	
Together Building United Communities (TBUC) - Uniting Communities through Sport and Creativity- Uniting Derg project - Todds Leap, Dame Kelly Holmes Trust, Peace Players NI		Y
Infrastructure Planning & Delivery Support Unit – Small Capital Grants Programme (Funded through DfC's Small Capital Grants Programme (2019/20), with Co-Operation Ireland acting as Intermediary Funding Body)	Y	
Infrastructure Planning & Delivery Support Unit – Access & Inclusion Grants Programme (Funded through DfC's Access & Inclusion Programme (2019/20), in partnership with DAERA and the Public Health Authority)	Y	

My Department's planned (ii) future projects in West Tyrone are summarised below. The table includes details of those projects which have a budget allocation, but have not yet commenced.

Table (ii)

Project	Fully Funded Yes (Y)	Part Funded Yes (Y)
Strabane Revitalisation – Church St., Butcher St. Market St. – Derry City and Strabane District Council	Y	
Adria Factory Site, Strabane (Social Housing)		Y
Property at Brook Manor, Magheramason (Social Housing)		Y
Property at Railway Street, Strabane (Social Housing)		Y

Project	Fully Funded Yes (Y)	Part Funded Yes (Y)
Property at Ballymongan Road, Castlederg, Co. Tyrone, BT81 7HF Listed building – Historic Environment Division		Y
St. Columba's Church of Ireland, Church Street, Omagh, Co. Tyrone, BT78 1DG Listed building – Historic Environment Division		Y

The Department is also undertaking a process of assessment and appraisal on recurrent projects. Funding of such projects into future financial years will be subject to a successful appraisal process.

The information provided relates to Departmental projects only, it does not include information relating to the Department's Non Departmental Public Bodies or Agencies.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities when she intends to bring forward legislation to reverse the Office of National Statistics' reclassification of housing associations.

(AQW 621/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In line with "New Decade, New Approach" I intend to bring forward legislation as soon as possible to facilitate reversal of the Office for National Statistics' classification of Housing Associations as Non-Financial Public Corporations.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Communities how many new build Housing Executive homes will begin construction in East Londonderry in 2020.

(AQW 629/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive no longer builds new social housing. All new social housing is delivered by housing associations through the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP). The Housing Executive has responsibility for the programme management of the SHDP, on behalf of my Department.

In the Constituency: There have been 38 social housing units completed in 2019/20. The details of these units are included in Table 1 below.

There are currently 128 social housing units under construction. The details of these units are included in Table 2 below.

There are 50 social housing units programmed due to start through the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) in 2019/20 – 2021/22 (32 units in 2019/20 and 18 units in 2020/21). The details of these units are included in Table 3 below.

Additional schemes may also be added to the SHDP in-year through the purchase of Existing Satisfactory / Off-the-shelf properties.

Table 1: Social housing completions to-date in 2019/20 (38 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Choice	Eglinton Street	Portrush	Reimprovement	General Needs	Urban	8	2016/17	2019/20
Choice	Mark Street	Portrush	Reimprovement	General Needs	Urban	8	2016/17	2019/20
Choice	Ramore Court	Portrush	Reimprovement	General Needs	Urban	10	2016/17	2019/20
Triangle	26 Drummond Manor	Limavady	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2016/17	2019/20
Triangle	38 Drummond Manor	Limavady	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2016/17	2019/20
Triangle	26 College Court	Limavady	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2016/17	2019/20
Triangle	1 & 5 Portrush Road	Coleraine	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	2	2019/20	2019/20

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Triangle	1-5 Castlecroft Drive	Dungiven	Off The Shelf	General Needs	Rural	5	2019/20	2019/20
Triangle	The Crescent	Coleraine	Off The Shelf	General Needs	Urban	2	2019/20	2019/20

Table 2: Social housing units under construction (128 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Choice	Beresford Avenue	Coleraine	Design & Build	General Needs	Urban	14	2019/20	2020/21
Clanmil	13 Union Street	Coleraine	New Build	Elderly CAT1	Urban	18	2017/18	2019/20
Habinteg	45 Girona Avenue	Portrush	New Build	General Needs	Urban	7	2018/19	2020/21
Habinteg	45 Girona Avenue	Portrush	New Build	Wheelchair	Urban	3	2018/19	2020/21
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	Design & Build	General Needs	Urban	57	2019/20	2021/22
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	Design & Build	Elderly CAT1	Urban	12	2019/20	2021/22
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	Design & Build	Wheelchair	Urban	6	2019/20	2021/22
Rural	Site adjacent to 299 Foreglen Road	Foreglen	New Build	General Needs	Rural	3	2019/20	2020/21
Triangle	21 Parklea	Portstewart	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2016/17	2019/20
Triangle	22 Ashdale	Coleraine	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2016/17	2019/20
Triangle	8-10 Upper Captain Street	Coleraine	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	5	2016/17	2019/20
Triangle	8 Thornlea Drive	Coleraine	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2017/18	2019/20

Table 3: Programmed to start 2019/20 – 2021/22 (50 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	Hass Road, Phase 3 (T)	Dungiven	New Build	General Needs	Rural	18	2019/20	2021/22
Apex Housing	Hass Road, Phase 3 (T)	Dungiven	New Build	Wheelchair	Rural	4	2019/20	2021/22
Triangle	32 Ballycastle Road	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	Urban	3	2019/20	2020/21
Triangle	Harpurs Hill, Phase 2 (T)	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	Urban	7	2019/20	2020/21
Apex Housing	Coastguard Road	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	Rural	6	2020/21	2021/22
Triangle	Main Street	Limavady	New Build	General Needs	Urban	12	2020/21	2021/22

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for Willowbrook, Bangor, over the next two years.

(AQW 634/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below provides details of planned Housing Executive maintenance schemes for Willowbrook, Bangor, over the next two years.

Scheme	20/21	21/22
Kitchens	Willowbrook	

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for Rathgill, Bangor over the next two years.

(AQW 635/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below provides details of planned Housing Executive maintenance schemes for Rathgill, Bangor over the next two years.

Scheme	20/21	21/22
Bathrooms		Jubilee / Rathgill
Kitchens	Rathgill	
Double Glazing	Rathgill	
Heating	Bangor Estates (Originally installed 05/06)	

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for Whitehill and Lisnabreen, Bangor over the next two years.

(AQW 636/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below provides details of planned Housing Executive maintenance schemes for Whitehill and Lisnabreen, Bangor over the next two years.

Scheme	20/21	21/22
Bathrooms		Lisnabreen
Heating	Bangor Estates (Originally installed 05/06)	Bangor Previous Refusals
External Wall Insulation		Whitehill Estate

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for Bloomfield, Bangor over the next two years.

(AQW 637/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below provides details of planned Housing Executive maintenance schemes for Bloomfield, Bangor over the next two years.

Scheme	20/21	21/22
Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	Bloomfield Estate, Bangor	
External Cyclical Maintenance	Balloo Walk, Bangor	
	Bloomfield Estate	
Double Glazing	Bangor	
Heating	Bangor Estates (Originally installed 05/06)	Bangor Previous Refusals
Capital	Bloomfield Place Aluminium Bungalows	

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for Kilcooley, Bangor over the next two years.

(AQW 638/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below provides details of planned Housing Executive maintenance schemes for Kilcooley, Bangor over the next two years.

Scheme	20/21	21/22
Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	Kilcooley Phase 3	
	Kilcooley Phase 4	
	Kilcooley Phase 5	
Double Glazing	Bangor	Kilcooley Timber
External Improvement	Kilcooley Square	
Heating	Bangor Estates (Originally installed 05/06)	Bangor Previous Refusals

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the regeneration of Queen's Parade, Bangor.

(AQW 646/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department has appointed a developer, Bangor Marine, to take forward the comprehensive development scheme at Queen's Parade, Bangor. The developer is due to submit a full application for the proposed development in January, a major milestone for this £50 million regeneration scheme.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities how many people are on the social housing waiting list in Upper Bann; and what is the average waiting time.

(AQW 675/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has provided the following table detailing the total number of applicants on the social housing waiting list in the Upper Bann Parliamentary Constituency as at 31 December 2019, and both the mean and median months for applicants on the waiting list. As a comparator the same information is provided for the region as a whole.

Waiting List (WL) as at 31/12/19 by Upper Bann Parliamentary Constituency, Northern Ireland and Mean & Median Months.

Parliamentary Constituency	Total Number	Mean Months on the WL as at 31/12/19	Median Months on the WL as at 31/12/19
Upper Bann	2,300	34.1	18.0
N. Ireland	38,308	41.0	23.0

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what discussions her Department has had with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive about providing funds for the Affordable Warmth Scheme.

(AQW 690/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department funds the Affordable Warmth Scheme which is delivered in partnership with local Councils and the Housing Executive.

My Department is engaged in discussions regarding budgets for next year. As yet the budget allocation for the Affordable Warmth Scheme for 2020/21 has not been confirmed.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to outline her intentions to reform alcohol licensing laws, including a timescale.

(AQW 694/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The reform of licensing laws is an Executive priority under the New Decade, New Approach Deal and one which I am keen to move forward as soon as possible.

A consultation exercise to determine public opinion on current licensing laws and to seek views on whether changes could be made in the future to ensure the North has a more flexible and modern licensing framework to respond to changing expectations and lifestyles closed on 6 December 2019.

The consultation received 1500 responses which are currently being analysed by my officials. I am expecting an outcome report in the coming weeks and will bring my proposals to the Executive at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities, in light of the joint HOC Work and Pensions and the NI Affairs Committees inquiry, which recommends halting the implementation of the two-child limit in Northern Ireland and to reimburse any families who have been affected thus far, pending a full investigation into its financial impact on families with children and the potential discrimination against those with larger families and poorer communities, what engagement her Department has had with HM Government about halting the two child limit .

(AQW 708/17-22)

Ms Hargey: From April 2017 the British Government introduced a limit on support for a maximum of two children. This was implemented in NI, in line with the principle of parity on social security and the Fresh Start Agreement.

I am aware of the Joint House of Commons Work and Pensions and the NI Affairs Committee recommendation on this issue and will be considering the matter as part of my ongoing review of the impact of welfare reform here. I will be taking this forward over the coming weeks.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to convene a new welfare reform working group to examine how any welfare mitigation package can be strengthened.

(AQW 709/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am fully committed to delivering the review of the welfare mitigation measures as set out in the New Decade, New Approach Deal.

Since becoming Minister for Communities one of my priorities has been to engage with a number of key stakeholders on the future of the welfare mitigations. I have already met with the NI Human Rights Commission and I will shortly be meeting with representatives of the Cliff Edge NI coalition, Professor Eileen Evason and Kevin Higgins (AdviceNI). This programme of engagement will be invaluable in informing how the review of the welfare mitigation measures should be best taken forward.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail all strategies within her Department's remit which have expired during the last three years.

(AQW 711/17-22)

Ms Hargey: During the last three years, a total of six strategies within my remit have expired. A list of those strategies is attached at Annex A.

Annex A

To ask the Minister for Communities to detail all strategies within her Department's remit which have expired during the last three years.

- 1 Facing the Future: Housing Strategy for NI 2012-2017
- 2 Empty Homes Strategy 2013-2018
- 3 A Strategy to Improve the Lives of People with Disabilities 2012-2015 (extended to 31 March 2017).
- 4 The Executive's Child Poverty Strategy (2016-19)
- 5 Social Security Agency Official Error Strategy (2014-2017)
- 6 Sport Matters: The NI Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what assessment her Department has undertaken to examine the impact of the Universal Credit two child limit.

(AQW 712/17-22)

Ms Hargey: From 6 April 2017 the British Government introduced a limit on support for a maximum of two children. Families are not able to claim a child element for a third or subsequent child born on or after 6 April 2017 for whom a person is responsible. There are a number of exceptions to the two child limit, which are the same across the UK.

As part of the Summer Budget 2015 (<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dsd/nisra-summer-budget-2015.pdf>) my Department forecast the potential impact on families from limiting the per child element of both Child Tax Credit and Universal Credit to two children (for new births from 6 April 2017) to be £62m by 2019/20. Please note, subsequent to these forecasts, Universal Credit was delayed and was not fully rolled out in all offices in NI until the end of December 2018.

In the coming weeks, I will be considering this matter as part of the Welfare Reform Composite Evaluation Framework to measure the impact of the implementation of Welfare Reform across NI society.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to increase the provision of temporary accommodation in Limavady for people in urgent need of housing.

(AQW 720/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The NIHE has advised me that temporary accommodation information is available by local area only. Limavady is part of the Causeway local area. In the current financial year the Housing Executive have added five 'single let' properties in the Causeway area. 'Single lets' are private sector properties which are made available by the NIHE to homeless households.

The Housing Executive continues to review its temporary accommodation provision requirements in Causeway and will add suitable properties to its portfolio as they become available for people in urgent need.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Communities whether she has any plans to streamline the personal independence payment process for people with (i) life-limiting; and (ii) lifelong conditions.

(AQW 721/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Processes are already in place within Personal Independence Payment (PIP) to fully support people with life limiting conditions, known as 'special rules for the terminally ill'. Claims that meet the criteria are prioritised and processed urgently so that people receive PIP quickly. People do not have to complete the standard forms for PIP or attend a face to face assessment. The person will also be automatically awarded the enhanced rate of the Daily Living component of PIP without having to satisfy the normal qualifying criteria and they may also be entitled to the Mobility component of PIP depending on their mobility needs. At present a payment will credit to the person's bank account within an average of 5 days of the claim being made where the special rules criteria for PIP are met.

My Department is also working closely with counterparts in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in London on an in-depth evaluation of how the benefits system supports people nearing the end of their life and those with the most severe conditions. This review covers all social security benefits, including PIP.

My officials are ensuring that issues highlighted by stakeholders are fully reflected in the review. As part of this, in December 2019, my Department held an engagement event with expert stakeholders from Macmillan, Marie Curie NI, Age NI, Motor Neurone Disease Association NI and the British Medical Association, to ensure their views were captured and taken into account.

I am committed to ensuring local views are heard on this sensitive issue and my Department will continue to work with DWP on the evaluation.

With regard to people with lifelong conditions, in August 2018 my Department introduced changes whereby people who have a progressive condition and who had been awarded the highest level of PIP, and whose needs are unlikely to change, receive an on-going award with only a 'light touch' review after 10 years. In July 2019 similar changes were introduced for people who are over state pension age and in receipt of any rate of PIP.

These particular changes remove the need for unnecessary assessments for people with severe and/or progressive conditions or those over State Pension Age who are receiving PIP.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for Millisle over the next two years.

(AQW 747/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below details Housing Executive maintenance schemes that are planned for Millisle over the next two years.

Scheme	20/21	21/22
Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	Ballywalter / Cloughy / Greyabbey Peninsula Phase 1	
Heating	Peninsula (Originally installed 05/06)	Ards Solid Fuel (Previous Refusals)

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for the Churchill area of Bangor over the next two years.

(AQW 748/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below details Housing Executive maintenance schemes that are planned for the Churchill area of Bangor over the next two years.

Scheme	20/21	21/22
Heating	Bangor Estates (Originally installed 05/06)	Bangor (Previous Refusal)

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for the Springwell area of Groomsport over the next two years.

(AQW 749/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below shows Housing Executive maintenance schemes that are planned for the Springwell area of Groomsport over the next two years.

	20/21	21/22
Double Glazing	Breezemount / Conlig	
Heating	Bangor Estates (Originally installed 05/06)	Bangor (Previous Refusal)

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what actions the Housing Executive will take to promote and enhance Beechfield Community House, Donaghadee.

(AQW 750/17-22)

Ms Hargey: On 24th January 2020 the Housing Executive approved improvements to upgrade fire safety measures at Beechfield Community House and ensure it remains open for the benefit of the people in the area.

Prior to this the Housing Executive had concerns that the facility was not open on a regular basis. At the Housing Executive's request, Supporting Communities NI helped the community group to provide information to the Housing Executive about the opening hours of Beechfield and its programme of activities.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for (i) the Beechfield area; and (ii) the Ashfield area of Donaghadee over the next two years.

(AQW 751/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below details Housing Executive maintenance schemes that are planned for (i) the Beechfield area; and (ii) the Ashfield area of Donaghadee over the next two years.

	20/21	21/22
Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	Peninsula Phase 2	Peninsula Phase 3
Heating	Peninsula (Originally installed 05/06)	Ards Solid Fuel (Previous Refusal)
External Cyclical Maintenance	Donaghadee	

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities to detail any changes her Department has made following the independent review of the Personal Independence Payment Assessment Process, completed in 2018.

(AQW 760/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department has been proactively implementing the accepted recommendations from the first Independent Review of Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

A number of changes have been made to improve the service for people claiming PIP including the introduction of audio recording for PIP assessments carried out in Assessment Centres from 18 November 2019 and plans are being finalised to roll that service out for assessments carried out in the home in spring 2020.

A new Video Relay Service for British and Irish Sign Language users has been introduced to assist deaf and hard of hearing people apply for PIP and exchange information.

Other improvements include more flexibility for people needing to rearrange appointments for assessments and the provision of any reasonable adjustments required for the assessment.

Work has also concluded on the layout of the assessment rooms to ensure there is adequate space for people with mobility aids.

Changes have also been made to the PIP process involving receipt of evidence, and amendments made to terminology to ensure it is consistent throughout the process. Revised guidance has been put in place and training delivered for Disability

Assessors around self-harm and suicide to ensure it is only addressed where relevant and that this is done in a sensitive and professional manner.

In addition to these specific changes a number of other steps have been taken to improve awareness of PIP and the assessment process including my Department hosting five awareness sessions across NI in conjunction with Capita, Advice NI and the Law Centre.

To support this work, last autumn my Department published two short videos which provide information on the assessment activities and scoring mechanism and on what to expect at a PIP assessment.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Communities how many people are currently in receipt of Personal Independence Payment and Disability Living Allowance.

(AQW 765/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The most recent Personal Independence Payment and Disability Living Allowance statistics were published in November 2019 and covered the period up to 31 August 2019 for Personal Independence Payment and 24 August 2019 for Disability Living Allowance.

At those dates, 137,310 people were receiving Personal Independence Payment and 82,540 people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many people in each constituency are registered as homeless.

(AQW 788/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The information in the table below, provided by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, details the total applicants on the waiting list assessed as holding homeless 'Full Duty Applicant' (FDA) status broken down by Parliamentary Constituency at the end of December 2019.

Parliamentary Constituency	Total
Belfast East	925
<i>Belfast East/South*</i>	184
Belfast North	2352
Belfast South	1471
<i>Belfast South/Strangford*</i>	76
Belfast West	2373
<i>Belfast West/North*</i>	55
<i>Belfast West/South*</i>	19
East Antrim	779
East Londonderry	818
Fermanagh South Tyrone	734
Foyle	2526
Lagan Valley	1044
Mid Ulster	432
Newry & Armagh	1028
North Antrim	1041
North Down	836
South Antrim	897
South Down	1002
Strangford	658
Upper Bann	812
West Tyrone	530
Grand Total	20592

* FDA applicants are recorded by Common Landlord Areas (CLAs). Some of these CLAs cross Parliamentary Constituency boundaries. Therefore these persons holding FDA status in these CLAs cannot be disaggregated to

specific Parliamentary Constituencies and are presented separately. The CLAs which cross constituency boundaries are set out below.

Parliamentary Constituency	NIHE CLA
Belfast East/South	Cregagh Castlereagh
Belfast East/South	Willowfield/Upper Castlereagh Road
Belfast South/Strangford	Carryduff
Belfast West/North	Ainsworth
Belfast West/North	Twadell/Upper Woodvale
Belfast West/South	Hamill St / John Street
Belfast West/North	Carrick Hill / Unity Flats
Belfast East/South	Bridge End / Rotherdam Court

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of empty homes in each constituency. (AQW 789/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Information on the number of empty homes is held by the Department of Finance's Land and Property Services. The most recent figures (as at 22 September 2019) that Land and Property Services (LPS) has provided to my Department indicate a total of 19,111 empty residential properties across NI. LPS only provide this information by Council area and the table below shows the breakdown;

District Council	Domestic Dwellings
Antrim and Newtownabbey	906
Ards and North Down	1,443
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	1,912
Belfast	3,213
Causeway Coast and Glens	1,729
Derry City and Strabane District Council	1,252
Fermanagh and Omagh	2,361
Lisburn and Castlereagh	1,077
Mid and East Antrim	1,163
Mid Ulster	1,931
Newry, Mourne and Down	2,124
Total	19,111

LPS have advised that these figures should be treated with caution as there is no requirement for ratepayers to inform Land and Property Services that their property is vacant.

The information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistic Authority.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to outline the legislative process and indicative timeframe for the continuation of the welfare mitigation package; and whether there will be a gap between the current welfare mitigation package ending and the new legislation being passed.

(AQW 834/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I will be seeking Executive agreement to bring forward a Bill to reform the Welfare Reform Order beyond 31 March 2020. Officials are currently working as a priority to ensure all necessary arrangements are in place by 31st March 2020 with regards to passing the necessary subordinate legislation to extend the welfare mitigation package. An indicative timeframe for the passing of the required legislation is still being finalised.

Should there be any issue with passing legislation through the Assembly by 31st March 2020 officials are also working to ensure that there will be no gap in mitigation payments.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities (i) to detail the work undertaken by her Department as part of the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan 2013 – 2018; (ii) how many empty homes were brought back into use, broken down by constituency; and (iii) whether she intends to bring forward a similar or new Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan.

(AQW 883/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The following work has been undertaken during the implementation of the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan 2013 -2018: raising awareness of the Empty Homes issue through information leaflets included with all domestic rates bills; the establishment of an Empty Homes Unit in NIHE with a new Empty Homes website to enable members of the public to report empty homes in their area; £13.9 million in Financial Transactions Capital loan funding was made available to Clanmil and Apex Housing Associations to bring over 300 empty homes back into use; the NI Housing Executive used its vesting powers to acquire and demolish an empty tower block in Rathcoole which was replaced with 18 new social homes by Helm Housing Association; and legislation has been amended to allow the sharing of information between the Department, NIHE and Land and Property Services.

The total number of empty homes brought back into use in NI as a result of the strategy to date is 223. (Clanmil 140; Apex 65; Helm 18). The information is not currently available by constituency.

The Empty Homes Strategy 2013-2018 has undergone an internal review and my Department is currently exploring how the findings will help inform future policy interventions on bringing empty homes back into use.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities what emerging mitigations she will consider as she reviews the welfare system; and whether the same annual amount, as is in the Fresh Start agreement, will continue to be allocated to Welfare Reform mitigation measures after 31 March 2020.

(AQW 901/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Officials are currently developing proposals for a review of the welfare mitigation measures as detailed in the New Decade, New Approach Deal. I can provide an assurance that as part of the review officials will be engaging with key stakeholders in the independent advice sector. Any proposals for further mitigations will also give due consideration to my Department's equality and human rights responsibilities. The outcome of the review will be presented to the Executive in due course.

The Department has submitted bids to Department of Finance to secure the funding required to continue existing Mitigation payments beyond 31st March 2020. The bid submitted to the Department of Finance for 2020-21 differs from annual amounts in the Fresh Start agreement, as the bid is based on the latest projected caseloads and expenditure on the schemes to date.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Sexual Orientation Strategy.

(AQW 944/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am fully committed to addressing any barriers or inequalities related to sexual orientation, in line with New Decade, New Approach and the Programme for Government. My officials will soon commence work with representatives from the LGBT sector and other key stakeholders to develop a Sexual Orientation strategy that will help to address these issues. A co-production, co-design approach will ensure that full consideration is given to all relevant issues and LGBT people will play a central role in this process.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities what discussions her Department has had with the UK Government Equalities Office regarding its intention to reform the Gender Recognition Act 2004.

(AQW 945/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Officials from the Department of Finance are in regular contact with their counterparts in the Government Equalities Office regarding the ongoing review of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 in England and Wales. Officials from the Scottish Government, which is carrying out its own review, also participate in these discussions. The next such meeting is scheduled for later this month.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what plans her Department has to increase the Rates Support Grant to Councils.

(AQW 1015/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The level of the Rates Support Grant (RSG) budget for 2020/21 will be set when the Departmental Budget has been confirmed. The overall level of RSG that will be available next year can only be considered in the context of the wider budgetary position of the Department for the 2020/21 financial year.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department has either protocols, or proposed protocols, to ensure that officials use the term North of Ireland rather than Northern Ireland in internal briefing documents.

(AQW 1056/17-22)

Ms Hargey: No such protocols are in place or are proposed.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the projected costs for the redevelopment of Casement Park.

(AQO 34/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The completion of Casement Park is a key priority of the Executive under the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement. Getting Casement built is one of my key goals and I am determined to do all I can to see the project started at the earliest opportunity. As we can see from the redevelopment of the Windsor Park Stadium and the Kingspan Stadium, these projects have a positive impact for the whole community, which goes far beyond the benefits for sport.

The current approved budget for the Casement Park Project is £77.5m, including UCGAA Partnership funding of £15million.

The delay to project construction commencement is currently over six years and I recognise that project cost increases have resulted due to construction inflation and repeated design stages to ensure public safety is not compromised.

A revised Full Business Case (FBC) is being finalised by UCGAA, which identifies potential increased project costs of circa £110million.

This increase in projected costs of circa £33m may change as the Planning Application and implementation of the agreed construction procurement strategy progress.

I welcome the partnership between the UCGAA and officials from my Department. I appreciate that there is a shortfall in the agreed budget, given the increases to cost estimates that I have outlined. We will need to work together to address this.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities to outline her plans to ensure that Housing Executive properties are in a safe and clean condition.

(AQO 41/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As the sponsor Department for the NI Housing Executive, health and safety compliance within this organisation is a key priority for my Department. To ensure these obligations are met, my Department monitors compliance through its established governance arrangements and ensures that, where issues are identified, appropriate corrective action is taken at the earliest opportunity.

The Housing Executive has advised that prior to occupation it applies a set of minimum standards to ensure that its properties are habitable, i.e. safe and clean, before they are let. Dwellings are thoroughly cleaned and all debris removed.

The Housing Executive undertakes mandatory health and safety tests before occupation, including: electrical inspection, heating system, smoke and heat detectors, water system and removal or repair of any health and safety risks. For security, all locks must be working and all window panes intact.

To ensure properties are maintained on an ongoing basis the Housing Executive delivers an annual programme of maintenance schemes and housing stock improvements. In 2018/19, they spent £128 million on such schemes.

For emergency repairs all Housing Executive tenants have access to a 24 hour repairs service. Faults that carry the risk of immediate injury to people or major damage to property are assigned emergency status. To ensure the safety of tenants, emergency repairs are dealt with on the same day, or within 24 hours.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Communities whether rural proofing will be included in any future anti-poverty strategy.

(AQO 37/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The "New Decade, New Approach" document has detailed support for a new Programme for Government underpinned by key supporting strategies including the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) introduced by the deputy First Minister in 2016 when she was Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, provides a statutory duty on all public authorities to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services. Indeed this is now a standard element in all policy development.

By adopting a co-design, co-production approach my officials will work to develop an Anti-Poverty Strategy for consideration by the Executive and in doing so will have due regard to the social and economic needs of persons in rural areas during both its development and its implementation.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the introduction of the Sign Language Bill.

(AQO 36/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The New Decade, New Approach agreement includes a commitment to bring forward a Sign Language Bill, and my officials are carrying out the necessary preparatory work with the sector.

Irish Sign Language (ISL) and British Sign Language (BSL) are the first or preferred means of communication for people who are profoundly deaf and are used by a significant number of their families and friends here. Therefore, I am sure you will join me and welcome the presence of our sign language interpreters today.

My Department provides £200,000 (two hundred thousand pounds) for a range of sign language initiatives, including free family sign language courses for families with deaf children and Deaf awareness and Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language taster classes to schools, voluntary and community groups.

In addition, key information about Personal Independence Payments and Universal Credit, has been translated in to Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language videos, and is available through NI Direct.

Deaf claimants can now speak to staff about their benefits using remote Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language interpreters.

I fully support the introduction of legislation to ensure that users of both ISL (Irish Sign Language) and BSL (British Sign Language) have the same rights, opportunities and quality of life as those of us in the hearing community.

This is an important equality issue and I look forward to publishing a timeframe for bringing forward legislation as soon as I am in a position to do so.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Communities to outline the proposed consultation process for the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer.

(AQO 40/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am fully committed to delivering the Sub Regional Stadia Programme which was included in the “New Decade, New Approach” Agreement and is a priority for my Department.

This programme will transform soccer at all levels by addressing the current and future needs of the game.

It provides a real opportunity to contribute to the delivery of wider government priorities and to address a range of social, economic and cultural issues. The Programme itself must be open and transparent.

It is critical that any improvements to existing stadia or new developments prioritise health and safety provision, accessibility and inclusion as well as being sustainable and based on realistic needs.

A 12-week consultation on Programme proposals, based on an IFA Facility Strategy dated 2011, took place from 30 November 2015 closing on 22 February 2016.

However, in the absence of Ministers, no decisions were made on Programme proposals or on financial allocations within the programme.

Given that the IFA strategy on which the consultation was based on is now nine years old and things have changed, I think it is right to take the time to review the Programme.

I have asked my officials to urgently engage with key strategic stakeholders including the IFA, the NI Football League and representatives from District Councils to help inform the development of detailed plans for delivering a successful Sub Regional Programme.

Once this engagement has been completed, I will then consider proposals on how best to take the Programme forward.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer.

(AQO 35/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am fully committed to delivering the Sub Regional Stadia Programme which was included in the “New Decade, New Approach” Agreement and is a priority for my Department.

This programme will transform soccer at all levels by addressing the current and future needs of the game.

It provides a real opportunity to contribute to the delivery of wider government priorities and to address a range of social, economic and cultural issues. The Programme itself must be open and transparent.

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Once this engagement has been completed, I will then consider proposals on how best to take the Programme forward.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the release of publicly owned land for social housing development.

(AQO 38/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department's Public Land for Housing Project has, to date, identified six public sector sites for release for housing. These have the potential to deliver at least one hundred and forty five social housing units.

Work is ongoing to identify and release further sites to meet the Programme for Government target to release ten sites for housing by March 2021.

One of the key barriers to social housing supply is land availability. In order to help address this issue, the Department continues to work in conjunction with the NIHE to provide surplus public land sites to Housing Associations for housing.

The NIHE's annual publication of the Commissioning Prospectus details the local housing requirements and directs Housing Associations site-search activity to help address under-provision, in specific locations.

Land / property suitable for housing use may be made available from Government Departments and Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs).

Most public sector land is currently being used, or has a use planned for it. Public Sector organisations are not permitted to bank land.

I will consider if further steps could be taken to release more land for social homes in areas of objective housing need.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities to outline the planned reforms to, and timescale for delivery of, the Housing Selection Scheme.

(AQO 33/17-22)

Ms Hargey: A consultation on 'A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations' ran from September to December 2017.

This was the culmination of a Department-led review to examine the Housing Selection Scheme.

During previous phases of the Review, stakeholders commented that they valued aspects of the current Scheme, including the principle of universal access and that allocations should prioritise applicants in greatest need.

However some stakeholders also raised concerns, saying, for example, that applicants with intimidation points are given too much priority over other applicants who have received threats of violence or experienced violence, such as victims of domestic abuse.

Taken together, the proposals contained in the consultation document are intended to produce five key outcomes:

- A greater range of solutions to meet housing need;
- An improved system for the most vulnerable applicants;
- A more accurate waiting list that reflects current housing circumstances;
- Those in greatest housing need receive priority, with recognition of their time in need; and
- Better use of public resources by ensuring the waiting list moves smoothly.

While improvements to the allocations system cannot physically deliver more social homes, they can ensure we make the best use of our existing resources.

Analysis of stakeholder feedback has been completed by my Departmental officials.

I will be considering the Review, options and next steps in the coming weeks.

Department of Education

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) how an appropriately funded childcare strategy will be delivered; and (ii) what provisions it will make for extended access to quality, affordable childcare.

(AQW 228/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I plan to bring an updated Childcare Strategy to my Executive colleagues for consideration and approval in due course. The Strategy will take account of the responses to the consultation undertaken in 2015, the policy priorities set by the Executive and the extended early education and care services available in other jurisdictions.

A number of key policy and resourcing decisions are required to finalise the Strategy and its associated actions, not least the scope of and funding available to develop extended, affordable, responsive and high quality early education and care provision for families with children aged 3 to 4.

I am not in a position to outline how the Strategy will be delivered in advance of the Executive's consideration of the budget and resources available to deliver all the actions.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) how; and (ii) when he will introduce legislative guidelines to ensure therapeutic support, rather than restraint and seclusion, for children and young people
(AQW 229/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have asked my officials to consider the issues of restraint and seclusion for children and young people with relevant partners and to report back in due course.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to list the current food hygiene rating for each nursery school, primary school and post-primary school in the Strangford constituency.
(AQW 670/17-22)

Mr Weir: All schools registered with the Department of Education in the Strangford Constituency have received a Food Hygiene Rating of '4' or '5' (hygiene standards are 'good' or 'very good'), with one school awaiting inspection.

Pre-Schools

All Pre-Schools in the Strangford Constituency have received a Food Hygiene Rating of 5 (hygiene standards are very good):

- Newtownards Nursery School – Newtownards
- Kircubbin Community Nursery School – Kircubbin
- Glenbrook Nursery School – Newtownards
- Regent House School (Prep) – Newtownards

Primary Schools

Please find below a list of Primary Schools who have achieved a Food Hygiene Rating of 5 (hygiene standards are very good):

- Grey Abbey Primary School – Greyabbey
- Carrickmannon Primary School – Newtownards
- Newtownards Model Primary School – Newtownards
- Kirkistown Primary School – Cloughey
- Castle Gardens Primary School – Newtownards
- Victoria Primary School – Ballyhalbert
- Portavogie Primary School – Portavogie
- Ballywalter Primary School – Ballywalter
- Ballynahinch Primary School – Ballynahinch
- Derryboy Primary School – Crossgar
- Comber Primary School – Comber
- Victoria Primary School – Newtownards
- Moneyrea Primary School – Moneyrea
- Alexander Dickson Primary School – Ballygowan
- Londonderry Primary School – Newtownards
- Carrowdore Primary School – Carrowdore
- West Winds Primary School – Newtownards
- Andrews Memorial Primary School – Comber
- Academy Primary School – Saintfield
- Killinchy Primary School – Killinchy
- Abbey Primary School – Newtownards
- St Caolan's Primary School – Saintfield
- St Joseph's Primary School – Crossgar
- St Patrick's Primary School – Ballynahinch
- St Mary's Primary School – Saintfield
- St Finian's Primary School – Newtownards
- St Mary's Primary School – Killyleagh
- St Mary's Primary School – Portaferry
- Kircubbin Integrated Primary School – Kircubbin
- Portaferry Integrated Primary School – Portaferry
- Killyleagh Integrated Primary School – Killyleagh
- Loughries Integrated Primary School – Newtownards
- Millennium Integrated Primary School – Saintfield
- Drumlins Integrated Primary School – Ballynahinch

Please find below a list of Primary Schools in the Strangford Constituency who have achieved a Food Hygiene rating of 4 (hygiene standards are good):

- St Patricks Primary School – Portaferry
- St Marys Primary School - Kircubbin

One Primary School is awaiting a Food Hygiene rating inspection:

- St Marys Primary School - Comber

Post-Primary Schools

All Post-Primary Schools in the Strangford Constituency received a Food Hygiene Rating of 5 (hygiene standards are very good):

- Movilla High School – Newtownards
- Saint Colman's High and Sixth Form College – Ballynahinch
- The High School Ballynahinch - Ballynahinch
- Lagan College – Castlereagh
- Nendrum College – Comber
- Strangford Integrated College – Carrowdore
- Glastry College – Newtownards
- Regent House School (Grammar) – Newtownards
- Saintfield High School – Saintfield
- Assumption Grammar School – Ballynahinch
- Saint Columba's College – Portaferry

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Education what actions his Department is taking to improve the time it takes the Education Authority to deliver statements of Special Educational Needs; and to outline the average waiting time for these statements for each of the last five years.

(AQW 725/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department is introducing a new Special Educational Needs (SEN) Framework, key aspects of which are to reduce the timescales associated with the statementing process and to improve co-operation between the Education Authority (EA) and Health Trusts.

I intend to launch a formal consultation on the Framework in Spring 2020.

The average waiting time for completion of the statutory assessment and statementing process for each of the last four* years, as provided by the EA, is as follows:

Average Waiting Time (Case Open Date to Final Statement Issued)

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Weeks	43	42	44	40

* 2014-15 data for the five legacy Education and Library Boards is not readily available from the EA.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) how many children have received a Statement of Special Educational Needs for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in West Tyrone over the last three years; and (ii) the average time for this process to be completed.

(AQW 733/17-22)

Mr Weir: 102 Children received a Statement of Special Education Need in the West Tyrone Parliamentary constituency over the years 2017, 2018, and 2019 with either Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) as a Primary Need or an Additional Need. The reference 'ADD' includes all pupils with a diagnosis of either ADD or ADHD.

The average time for this process to be completed: 22 Cases were completed within 26 weeks or less; 51 Cases were completed within 27 Weeks to 39 Weeks (all cases were subject to Valid Statutory Exceptions); 29 Cases were completed 40 to 57 weeks (all cases were subject to Valid Statutory Exceptions).

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of a new build for Priory Integrated College.

(AQW 786/17-22)

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.

The Education Authority (EA) has submitted a business case which is now with the Department of Finance for approval.

The EA has advised that they will complete the appointment of an Integrated Consultancy Team in February 2020 to carry out the design of the proposed Priory Integrated College.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's policies in relation to the introduction of mandatory autism training for trainee teachers and existing teaching staff.

(AQW 791/17-22)

Mr Weir: I recognise and value the role of all educators in ensuring that all children with special educational needs, especially autism, are supported with the opportunity to secure the best educational outcomes. Therefore, I will continue to consider how to best implement such training for both initial teacher education and continuing professional development for all staff in this field.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the rate per thousand of primary school pupils with a less than 85 percent attendance in 2018/19, broken down by (a) constituency; (b) electoral ward by constituency; and (ii) the action being taken to reduce the levels of absenteeism.

(AQW 831/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Due to resource issues within the Department of Education, Analytical Services Unit, attendance data for the academic year 2018/19 were not processed and published. It is envisaged that attendance data for the academic year 2019/20 will be processed and published in January 2021.

I have arranged for comparable data for 2017/18 to be placed in the Assembly Library.

- (ii) I launched the pupil attendance strategy "Miss School = Miss Out" in December 2016 which provides a strategic framework for all the work that goes into maximising pupil attendance at schools. The four key themes identified within that strategy continue to be relevant today; strategic leadership; early intervention; tailored support and collaboration and engagement.

Actions are being progressed in numerous ways by the Department of Education, Education Authority, Education Welfare Service, schools, families and children.

A case studies good practice guide "The Challenge of Improving Pupil Attendance at School" was published by the Department in December 2018.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the rate per thousand of fifteen to seventeen year old pupils with a less than 85 percent attendance in 2018/19, broken down by (a) constituency; (b) electoral ward by constituency; and (ii) any action being taken to reduce the levels of absenteeism.

(AQW 832/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Due to resource issues within the Department of Education, Analytical Services Unit, attendance data for the academic year 2018/19 were not processed and published. It is envisaged that attendance data for the academic year 2019/20 will be processed and published in January 2021.

I have arranged for comparable data for 2017/18 to be placed in the Assembly Library.

- (ii) I launched the pupil attendance strategy “Miss School = Miss Out” in December 2016 which provides a strategic framework for all the work that goes into maximising pupil attendance at schools. The four key themes identified within that strategy continue to be relevant today; strategic leadership; early intervention; tailored support and collaboration and engagement.

Actions are being progressed in numerous ways by the Department of Education, Education Authority, Education Welfare Service, schools, families and children.

A case studies good practice guide “The Challenge of Improving Pupil Attendance at School” was published by the Department in December 2018.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the rate per thousand of post-primary school pupils with a less than 85 percent attendance in 2018/19, broken down by (a) constituency; (b) electoral ward by constituency; and (ii) any action being taken to reduce the levels of absenteeism.

(AQW 833/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Due to resource issues within the Department of Education, Analytical Services Unit, attendance data for the academic year 2018/19 were not processed and published. It is envisaged that attendance data for the academic year 2019/20 will be processed and published in January 2021.

I have arranged for comparable data for 2017/18 to be placed in the Assembly Library.

- (ii) I launched the pupil attendance strategy “Miss School = Miss Out” in December 2016 which provides a strategic framework for all the work that goes into maximising pupil attendance at schools. The four key themes identified within that strategy continue to be relevant today; strategic leadership; early intervention; tailored support and collaboration and engagement.

Actions are being progressed in numerous ways by the Department of Education, Education Authority, Education Welfare Service, schools, families and children.

A case studies good practice guide “The Challenge of Improving Pupil Attendance at School” was published by the Department in December 2018.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Education to outline the guidance provided to schools to enable them to support LGBT pupils. **(AQW 853/17-22)**

Mr Weir: Circular 2017/04 ‘Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools – a Guide for Schools’, is the Department’s main guidance in respect of safeguarding and child protection responsibilities in schools and contains specific information relating to gender identity issues and sexual orientation.

The Department’s ‘iMatter’ Programme aims to support the entire school community to be engaged in promoting resilient emotional health for all pupils. It is delivered through a range of support services, including the Independent Counselling Service for Schools (for post primary age pupils) and also offers a suite of resources for children and young people which provide advice on coping with a range of emotional issues, including sexual identity.

In October 2019 the Education Authority published Guidance for Schools, EOTAS Centres and the Youth Service on Supporting Transgender Young People. The Guidance aims to support schools and other educational settings to develop and sustain effective pastoral care systems which can accommodate and develop the social, emotional, educational, physical and spiritual needs of all pupils within the school ethos.

Within the Curriculum, for a number of years, my Department has provided earmarked funding to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to support the production of Relationships and Sexuality Education guidance materials on teaching a range of sensitive topics, including guidance around LGBT issues.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) the lessons learned by his Department from the research report Post Primary School Experiences of 16-21 year old people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender (LGBT); and (ii) any actions he intends to improve the experience of LGBT young people in education.

(AQW 854/17-22)

Mr Weir: The research identified issues relating to bullying as a result of sexual orientation or gender identity; concerns regarding sexual health education delivered in Post-primary schools; and low levels of recognition of LGB&T issues and the associated impact on young people's emotional well-being.

The Department and its statutory partners continue to take forward a number of actions and programmes to address bullying in schools; to promote positive behaviours; and to provide guidance and support to pupils on relationships and sexuality education, including:

- The iMatter Programme;
- The Independent Counselling Service for Schools;
- Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour;
- Funding the Northern Ireland Anti Bullying Forum;
- The requirement for all grant-aided schools to develop their own policy on how they will address Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) within the curriculum;
- The publication by the Education Authority of its guidance on Supporting Transgender Young People; and
- All grant-aided schools to comply with the requirements of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (NI) 2016.

The Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015 requires all government departments and other named public bodies, including the Education Authority, to co-operate to improve the well-being of all children and young people. This requirement has been translated into outcomes in a Children and Young People's Strategy which I intend to bring to the Executive for consideration in the near future. The outcomes in the Strategy include respect for rights, including those of children and young people who are LGB&T.

I will continue to engage with relevant stakeholders to consider the needs of LGB&T young people within the education sector, and where appropriate, more broadly.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education to outline the required criteria for children to qualify for Education Other Than at School.

(AQW 859/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have been advised by the Education Authority (EA), that the required criteria for consideration of a placement in Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) are:

Pupil requires a period of intensive support beyond the level of EA Support Services intervention already accessed; risk of pupil's school placement breaking down; supporting a pupil to re-integrate to their registered school placement; and pupil has been expelled.

When making a referral to the EA, schools are requested to identify which criteria is relevant to the needs of the pupil, outline what intervention and support strategies have been implemented and their outcomes, and detail all reasonable and purposeful measures implemented to date.

All referrals must evidence parental consent to the referral for consideration of EOTAS placement and pupil consent to accessing additional support.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education pursuant to AQW 225/17-22 and following correspondence received in 2019, whether the Education Authority has changed its decision on planning for a new build youth centre in Strabane.

(AQW 864/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority Youth Service is working with internal Education Authority partners to develop a business case for the Strabane area, taking into account the strategic context, area based plans, population and demographics, current provision and future options.

This business case will present the Education Authority with a number of options upon which any decision for planning a new build youth centre in Strabane will be made.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail primary one admission figures for the Lagan Valley area, in each of the past 5 years.

(AQW 915/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the assembly library.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on (i) new school build projects announced in March 2016; and (ii) a timeline for their delivery.

(AQW 927/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 15 March 2016 10 Primary Schools were announced to advance to planning at a total capital value of circa £40m. To date 5 projects have received Business Case approval and are at early planning stage. Business Cases for the remaining 5 projects are being prepared at present.

On 23 March 2016 the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced a list of 23 Fresh Start shared and integrated school capital projects. The announcement confirmed funding for 17 schemes to proceed to planning and approval for construction in 6 projects.

Of the Fresh Start projects one school has completed construction with one due to be completed in April 2020. A further 14 Fresh Start projects have received Business Case approval and are proceeding through the planning stages. Business Cases for 6 Fresh Start schemes are being prepared at present. One Fresh Start scheme is on hold.

Due to the complexity of capital projects there are a number of factors that dictate their delivery; however, it is anticipated that the majority will be on site in 2022.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education (i) what actions his Department is taking to deal with pressures on Special Education Schools; and (ii) what support the Education Authority can provide to deal with these pressures.

(AQW 962/17-22)

Mr Weir: In 2019-20, my Department secured additional funding of £14.4m to address SEN related pressures in the June and September monitoring exercise, of which the Education Authority (EA) allocated £3m to Special Education Schools.

A further £10m additional funding for SEN was secured through the January monitoring exercise, with £1.4m of that allocated to Special Schools.

Since 2016, under the School Enhancement Programme, two special schools have had new builds; one school has a new build scheme on site and a further school is currently progressing through the design process. A further ten special schools are to advance in planning under the second call. The EA is currently working with a number of schools to identify and address accommodation pressures through the minor capital works programme.

Special School enrolment figures are reviewed annually and officers from the EA work in partnership with Special School Principals and the Board of Governors, on an individual school basis, to agree the teaching and non-teaching staff requirements, in line with increasing pupil enrolment figures

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the future plans for Seaview Primary School.

(AQW 969/17-22)

Mr Weir: The RIBA Stage 1 - Technical Feasibility Report for the Seaview Primary School project was approved by the Department in October 2019. This report will be used to inform the development of a business case which will identify the preferred option. I am advised that the Education Authority aims to submit the draft business case to the Department in spring 2020.

Once the business case is completed an Integrated Consultant Team will be appointed to take the project design forward.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the redevelopment of Glenwood Primary School.

(AQW 970/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department remains committed to progressing a scheme to deliver much needed major capital investment for Glenwood Primary School.

The Education Authority, as managing authority for the school, has been progressing a Feasibility Study to examine the technical options for the redevelopment of the school. The findings of this study have been used to inform the development of a robust business case to seek the necessary approvals for the proposed spend.

The Department has commented on a draft and has just received a final version and will work expediently to consider it.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Education what support his Department is providing to schools in the Foyle constituency to improve mental health.

(AQW 981/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and the Education Authority, to develop a Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework that will aim to enhance support for children and young people. The emphasis will be on promotion, prevention and early intervention, including how services can be augmented to support schools, and their pupils in all of our constituencies.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education for an update on the provision of an additional accommodation unit at Holywood Primary School.

(AQW 998/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has responsibility for minor works at Holywood Primary school and has advised that an accommodation analysis has identified the need for SEN accommodation and a multi-purpose space, to include storage and toilet facilities, at the school. This is in order to meet the needs of children who require additional support with aspects of their learning. Feasibility reports have been prepared. Following Business Case approval a planning application will be lodged for the emerging preferred option.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education how many children have had to travel to England and Scotland to attend Assessment and Treatment Units since 2016.

(AQW 1071/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has not facilitated the placement of any pupil in an Assessment and Treatment Unit in England or Scotland since 2016.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether he will (i) review the practise of stopping children from attending school due to individual school policies on haircuts or uniforms; and (ii) whether he will introduce a single policy that allows schools to take action short of denying educational classes for such breaches.

(AQW 1088/17-22)

Mr Weir: The wearing of a school uniform is not governed by legislation but falls to schools to determine. The day-to-day management of schools, including any rules regarding school uniform policy, is a matter for school Principals, subject to any directions that might be given by the Board of Governors. The Department of Education has drawn up guidance for schools in relation to their school uniform policies and this is contained in Circular 2011/04 – Guidance to Schools on School Uniform Policy, issued on 30 March 2011 (re-issued 5 June 2018). As school uniform polices are a matter for individual schools the guidance provides advice only.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of children in the Dickson Plan area that receive statements for social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), broken down by key stage; and (ii) any plans to extend nurture group funding into high schools in the Dickson Plan area and beyond.

(AQW 1090/17-22)

Mr Weir: Based on the Annual School Census data for 2018/19, the number of pupils attending Dickson Plan schools with a statement of Special Education Needs (SEN) for social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) is provided in the table.

Key Stage 3	18
Key Stage 4	9
Total	27

My Department currently provides funding for 31 Nurture Groups in Primary Schools. In my previous tenure as Education Minister, I gave a commitment that the Department would continue to fund these particular groups until a decision on a new Nurture Programme was made. This remains the position and I will be considering this matter in due course, including the option of extending provision.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education how his Department intends to spend the £10 million allocated for Special Educational Needs.

(AQW 1106/17-22)

Mr Weir: The £10 million additional funding will assist the Education Authority to address existing in-year demand pressures in the provision of Special Education Needs (SEN), and will be allocated to these pressures as follows: Special Schools (£1.4m), SEN in Mainstream Schools (£3.2m), Pupil Support (£1.5m) and SEN related transport (£3.9m).

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education what actions he intends to take to streamline the statementing process.

(AQW 1129/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department is working towards the introduction of a new Special Educational Needs (SEN) Framework, a key aspect of which is to streamline and improve the statementing process.

The new draft SEN Regulations propose significant changes to the timeframes for statutory assessment from 26 to 22 weeks and seek to introduce new timescales which will be new statutory duties for the Education Authority (EA). My Department intends to launch a formal consultation on these new SEN Regulations and an associated Code of Practice in Spring 2020 and I will be most interested to hear feedback on the proposals.

The Department also led a joint project to identify improvements to streamline the seeking and sharing of advice between the EA and Health and Social Care Trusts regarding the statutory assessment of children with SEN. Improvements identified through this project and the legislative changes that the Department will be consulting on, specifically the Regulations, will make a significant contribution to streamlining the process and contributing to a reduction in the timeframes for statutory assessments.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of Statements of Special Educational Need that have been provided to children in the Lagan Valley constituency each year since 2015.

(AQW 1143/17-22)

Mr Weir: The answer is contained in the table below.

Number of pupils resident in the Lagan Valley constituency recorded as having a Statement of Special Education Need by school type 2015/16 to 2018/19

	Primary	Post Primary	Special	Total
2015/16	327	260	359	946
2016/17	359	274	379	1012
2017/18	375	308	404	1087
2018/19	388	320	401	1109

Source: Annual School Census

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what plans her Department has to provide financial assistance to schools in Lagan Valley for capital projects.

(AQW 1144/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department targets capital investment in the schools estate through a range of programmes, including the Fresh Start, Major Capital Improvement and School Enhancement Programmes. Smaller improvements, valued at up to £500,000 are delivered through the ongoing Minor Works programme.

Rowandale Integrated Primary School, Fort Hill Integrated College and Fort Hill Integrated Primary School were included in the first tranche of projects announced in March 2016 to advance in planning under the Fresh Start Agreement.

To date, Business Case approval has been received for a 14 class base new build school for Rowandale Integrated Primary School and the scheme is progressing through the planning stages.

A business case for a major capital investment project at Fort Hill Integrated College and Fort Hill Integrated Primary School is being prepared at present.

Furthermore, Beechlaw School, Hillsborough, was included in the first tranche of projects announced in May 2019 to advance in planning under the School Enhancement Programme Second Call (SEP2). The proposed project is to address accommodation deficiencies within the existing school building.

With regard to Minor Works applications, these are reviewed and prioritised as they are received and are implemented on a priority basis depending on the capital available.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether he will reinstate the £12,500 funding for The Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS).

(AQW 1168/17-22)

Mr Weir: I acknowledge the work carried out by The Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS) and the valuable contribution that it has made in relation to North South co-operation and teacher education. However, given the very difficult position of the education budget, I will need time to reflect upon all of the challenging issues and financial pressures which DE is currently facing before setting future departmental priorities

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Education how his Department will encourage and facilitate Ulster-Scots in mainstream education.

(AQW 1177/17-22)

Mr Weir: The New Decade, New Approach Deal sets out that legislation will be brought forward to place a duty on my Department to encourage and facilitate the use of Ulster Scots in the education system.

I am committed to working collaboratively with stakeholders on the practical application of the duty as all children should have the opportunity to learn about the culture and heritage of the Ulster Scots community. The detail of the practical outworkings of this will flow from the legislation including the role of the commissioner.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the status of the Youth Council; and; (ii) an update on the progress made on implementing the Priorities for Youth.

(AQW 1178/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI) has not been operational since 1 April 2019 following expiry of the Term of Office of Board members and the inability to make new appointment in the absence of a Minister. I am currently considering the future role of the YCNI and intend to seek the views of the sector to inform my decision.

Significant progress has been made in implementing the 2013 Priorities for Youth (PfY) policy against substantial restructuring within the youth sector, including the establishment of the Education Authority (EA). The last major policy commitment (replacement of historic legacy funding arrangements for local and regional programmes and organisations) is currently being rolled out.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education given that Appendix 2 of New Decade, New Approach notes the diversity of school types is not sustainable, will the independent fundamental review consider the ending of a separate Irish language sector.

(AQW 1183/17-22)

Mr Weir: I will give consideration to the design and delivery of the Independent Review of Education provision as articulated in New Decade, New Approach. I would intend to bring forward proposals to the Executive which would include detail on the scope of such a review and the proposed terms of reference.

There is a statutory duty on my Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education and that of integrated education.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education what consideration his Department has given to review the social disadvantaged criteria for school admissions, and, in particular, Universal Credit as it can unfairly penalise parents on legacy benefits such as Tax Credits.

(AQW 1249/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am aware that the socially disadvantaged criteria for pre-school admissions as currently defined in legislation needs to be revised in the context of the roll-out of Universal Credit.

I am exploring the options for bringing forward amendments to the current legislation in advance of the next pre-school admissions process.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Education for an update on proposals for (i) new build schools; and (ii) the school enhancement programme within the Mid Ulster constituency.

(AQW 1286/17-22)

Mr Weir: The tables below provide a list of capital projects that have been selected to advance in planning under each of the various programmes.

Fresh Start Agreement (FSA) Programme

Project	Update
Phoenix Integrated Primary School	Business Case has been approved and scheme is progressing through planning stages

Major Works

Project	Update
Gaelscoil Úi Neill	RIBA Stage 3 Developed Design is complete and Planning Application is well advanced. Currently engaging with the local Council in regard to the land for the preferred option.
Holy Trinity College	Business Case has been approved and scheme is progressing through planning stages. A planning application was submitted in May 2019 and the procurement of a contractor has commenced.
Edendork Primary School	Business Case has been approved and the project is progressing through planning stages. It is hoped that the planning application will be lodged in the coming weeks following agreement on land.

School Enhancement Programme (SEP)

Project	Update
St Joseph's Grammar School	In planning
Kilronan School	In planning
St John's Primary School	In planning – ICT appointed
St Patrick's College	In planning

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education to outline any plans his Department has to support the re-establishment of the RADAR (Risk Avoidance Danger Awareness Resource) Centre.

(AQW 1294/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has no plans to support the re-establishment of the RADAR Centre. Given the difficult position of the education budget, I am not in a position to consider or commit funding at this time.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he authorised changes to the Dickson Plan, which now has children in post-primary education completing 30% of their academic in-year testing in year 9, with the remaining 70% in-year testing in year 10, instead of the previous 100% in year 10; and (ii) will he instruct the Education Authority to revert back to the original premise of the Dickson plan, where 100% of in-year testing is conducted in year 10.

(AQW 1304/17-22)

Mr Weir: For any significant change to education provision there is a statutory process which must be followed, which involves the publication of a Development Proposal.

There are currently no published proposals for changes to schools included in the Dickson Plan.

Schools have the autonomy to introduce minor changes, therefore, my Department has no role in the tests administered by the junior high schools.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education, following the Education Authority's recommendations in Languages for the Future – Northern Ireland languages strategy, whether (i) other language teaching will be rolled out to Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2; and (ii) parents will no longer be asked to pay for languages, other than English, to be taught to their child.

(AQW 1305/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Northern Ireland Languages Strategy 'Languages for the Future' was published in 2012. It was developed by the Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies Northern Ireland Partnership, chaired by Professor John Gillespie at Ulster University. The strategy was not adopted for implementation by the Executive.

Whilst language teaching is not compulsory at Key Stage 1 and 2, the Northern Ireland curriculum provides flexibility for primary schools to provide pupils with the opportunity to learn an additional language either during core teaching hours or as part of the school's extracurricular provision.

Many primary schools currently offer additional language opportunities. The recent British Council's Language Trends in Northern Ireland Survey (2019) indicated that fifty-five per cent of responding primary schools offer language teaching.

Publicly funded schools are not permitted to charge for education provided wholly or mainly during school hours, though schools may seek payment in relation to extracurricular activities.

My Department currently provides funding in the region of £300,000 per annum specifically to support and enhance language teaching and learning in schools. This includes provision of the Confucius Institute Classroom Programme which provides Mandarin language and Chinese culture lessons to around 20,000 pupils in primary and post-primary schools across Northern Ireland; and funding for the Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (NICILT) to promote languages to pupils and provide a range of professional development opportunities for teachers.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown of expenditure, to date, for the Strule Shared Education Campus, Omagh.

(AQW 1312/17-22)

Mr Weir: The total expenditure for the Strule Shared Education Campus from 2009 to date is as follows:

Expenditure (2009 – end December 2019)	Total (£000s)
Site Preparation Works	10,831
Professional Fees	10,052
Construction (Arvalee/Strathroy Link Road etc.)	16,547
Staff and Admin Costs	6,482
Other Resources (security/utilities/other fees etc.)	1,242
Total	45,154

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education to outline the professional fees for the Strule Shared Education Campus, for each of the last five years.

(AQW 1313/17-22)

Mr Weir: The professional fees for the last 5 years which includes fees for design, planning, construction and procurement delivery, tax and legal advice are as follows:

Professional Fees

Year	Total
15 – 16	1,511,349.04
16 – 17	2,541,225.38
17 – 18	1,459,373.43
18 – 19	850,823.01
19 – 20	290,109.92
	6,652,880.78

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to continue with the extended provision youth service funding.

(AQW 1321/17-22)

Mr Weir: Budgets for 2020-21 have not yet been confirmed and therefore no decisions in relation to extended youth provision can be taken at this stage.

I am mindful however of the value the work of the youth sector does in supporting young people to improve their overall life chances and I remain committed to ensuring that the needs of young people are prioritised in line with current policy objectives and within resources available.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education (i) for a breakdown of how the £10m additional monies announced in the January monitoring round will be spent; and (ii) whether any will be used to provide additional places at Knockevin Primary School, Dundrum.

(AQW 1323/17-22)

Mr Weir: The £10 million additional funding will assist the Education Authority to address existing in-year demand pressures in the provision of Special Education Needs (SEN), and will be allocated to these pressures as follows; Special Schools (£1.4m), SEN in Mainstream Schools (£3.2m), Pupil Support (£1.5m) and SEN related transport (£3.9m).

The funding will not be used to provide additional places.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Moyle Shared Education Programme between Cross and Passion College and Ballycastle High School.

(AQW 1389/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Ballycastle Shared Education campus will provide shared facilities for Cross and Passion College and Ballycastle High School.

The Planning Application for the project is due to be submitted in spring 2020 with construction expected to commence in 2021.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 689/17-22, (i) whether reliance on charitable donation alone for the provision of free sanitary products in schools is acceptable; and (ii) by what date will his Department have considered options for the provision of free sanitary products in all schools.

(AQW 1405/17-22)

Mr Weir: DE is the policy lead in this area in respect of schools however “period-poverty” is a cross-cutting issue therefore decisions regarding funding are for the NI Executive to consider. Given the very significant financial pressures faced by the NI Block and by the education sector in particular, I believe there is merit in keeping all options open.

I expect to receive advice on potential options in respect of the provision of free sanitary products in schools by the end of March 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what actions he will take to reform the current arrangements for transfer tests.

(AQW 1417/17-22)

Mr Weir: Whilst my Department has no role in the operation or administration of the current transfer tests, I would of course wish to see a transfer test process that is as accessible and straightforward as possible for children and parents. It clearly makes sense to try to avoid pupils being put through two systems, leading to five individual exams. I understand that our selective schools are working together to examine options for a single system and this is a matter I hope to pursue further over the coming months.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what proposals his Department has for a more sustainable funding system for youth work and youth centres.

(AQW 1418/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has been developing a new funding scheme in line with the Priorities for Youth (PfY) policy commitment to replace legacy funding arrangement from the former Education & Library Boards and the Youth Council for Northern Ireland.

The Education Authority (EA) is planning to launch the new funding scheme on 3 March 2020 following extensive engagement with youth sector organisations and other stakeholders. Further details are available at www.eanifunding.org.uk

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education whether he is in support of 20mph speed limits outside schools in urban areas.

(AQW 1443/17-22)

Mr Weir: The safety of children and young people is paramount and any initiatives that ensure the safety of our children are to be welcomed. It is for the Minister for Infrastructure to bring forward any proposals relating to changes to the speed limits.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to outline whether discussions have taken place to provide a new build for St Conor's College, Kilrea.

(AQW 1444/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, as the managing authority for St Conor's College, has submitted an application for the school under the latest call for major works, which closed on 31 October 2019.

My officials are currently undertaking preparatory work to prioritise applications received for a possible major capital announcement in the coming months.

As this is a live and ultimately competitive process, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the provision of a new build for St Conor's College at this time.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the new build for Cullybackey Community College.

(AQW 1499/17-22)

Mr Weir: A technical Feasibility Study to provide suitable post primary accommodation for 700 pupils in the Cullybackey area has been developed by the Education Authority, as the managing authority for Cullybackey College.

The report was submitted to the Department in December 2019 and is under active consideration. Once approved, it will be used to inform the development of a robust business case to identify the preferred option.

Work is currently underway to engage an Integrated Consultant Team to manage the project from cradle to grave and progress a full design. A short list of competitors has been drawn up following a pre-qualification process and a 'Call for Tender' is proceeding. It is envisaged that the Team will be appointed in the summer by which stage the business case should be well progressed.

Department of Finance

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance whether he has any plans to change his ministerial car to one which is powered by electricity or any other non-fossil fuel.

(AQW 368/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): When the ministerial car is due to be replaced options for a low emission car will be fully considered.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance whether he will afford local staff the same conscience rights as in Great Britain in respect of the provision of same-sex marriage facilities.

(AQW 505/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The new arrangements for same sex civil marriage that came into effect in January will confer equivalent protection to that available in Great Britain. That protection comes from a combination of existing human rights law on: freedom of speech; freedom of conscience; and freedom of religion, and protections contained in the Marriage (Same-sex Couples) and Civil Partnership (Opposite-sex Couples) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2019.

Consultation on religious same sex marriage and the relevant protections remains ongoing with regulations expected later in the year. It is inviting comment on the type of religious protection currently available in Great Britain—that no religious body or individual religious practitioner is obliged to perform a same sex marriage ceremony.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) whether the Executive has invested in funds that invest in the arms trade; and (ii) how much such investments represent.

(AQW 545/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive does not directly invest in any investment funds in order to make a return. However, in the interests of transparency I am providing detail of two areas where investment occurs.

The Northern Ireland Investment Fund was established by the Executive to provide finance to viable local private sector projects that cannot obtain full funding from commercial sources. The overall aim of the £100 million Investment Fund, which is managed by CBRE, is to promote investment, economic growth and jobs in the North of Ireland. The focus of the Fund is regeneration projects (including Grade A property), energy efficiency and low carbon projects. The Fund does not invest in the arms trade.

The Department of Finance administers legacy pension funds for the Assembly Contributory Pension Fund (ACPF) and Members Contributory Pension Fund (MCPF). There are very few remaining members across both schemes and we are therefore in the latter stages of the funds 'life cycle'. At 31 March 2019 the ACPF was worth £3.7 m and the MCPF £3.1 million. It is important to note that these are not Executive funds.

The Pension funds do not have any direct exposure to companies involved in the 'arms trade', via specific, individual holdings. However, the investment managers do invest in a range of funds and global index trackers which will provide some underlying exposure to companies who operate in industrial sectors that may have associations with the arms trade. Within the overall portfolio of over 11,000 underlying holdings, there is an allocation to the 'Aerospace and Defence' sector of approx. 0.71%. Officials will discuss with the Pension Funds to confirm there is no investment in the Arms Trade.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Finance, of the £2 billion funding for the Executive from the UK Government, how much is a result of (i) Barnett Consequentials; (ii) the confidence and supply arrangement; (iii) new money; and (iv) other sources.

(AQW 779/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Of the £2 billion proposed, half is future Barnett consequentials which would be received regardless of New Decade, New Approach.

The Secretary of State has indicated that that the undrawn funding previously committed under the Confidence and Supply Agreement will not now be provided, this amounts to £240 million. Therefore, of the remaining £1 billion only £760 million represents new funding. However I am attempting to secure the outstanding Confidence and Supply Money.

The £1 billion includes £140 million to address our unique circumstances. It is anticipated that this funding will be ring-fenced for specific purposes and some of these will be funded by the British government as opposed to providing additional funding to the block grant.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of (i) the Northern Ireland Civil Service's decision to centralise full-time Client Executive posts to Belfast; and (ii) the impact this decision will have on staff already employed in these posts which were originally allocated regionally.

(AQW 868/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am aware of the decision to establish a new Client Executive role within my Department's engagement services to Employers, and am supportive.

As this is a new role within the Department, no staff have held this post previously. With regard to the team's location, these staff will work closely with key service partners across the NICS employability and skills provision that are Belfast based.

This restructure follows a review of existing services to employers by the Department, which was supported by extensive engagement with employers and stakeholders that focussed on their service delivery needs.

As with any change to service delivery, existing structures have been redesigned. Consequently a small number of staff have been impacted by these changes, and they are being supported to transition into new posts.

I can also confirm that the posts were independently assessed by the NICS Grading Unit, and selection of staff has followed NICS HR policy. Trade Union Side has been engaged throughout the process to ensure transparency. This engagement will continue until the work is completed.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of vacancies in the Northern Ireland Civil Service broken down by (i) Department; (ii) grade; and (iii) location.

(AQW 869/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NICS HR is responsible for filling posts at the request of the NICS Departments. The table below provides the total number of posts that the NICS Departments have asked NICS HR to fill on their behalf. The information presented reflects the position as at 2 January 2020.

Analogous Grade	DAERA	DE	DFC	DfE	DfI	DoF	DoH	DOJ	PPS	TEO	Total
SCS			1		1	3		1		3	9
Grade 6	1	4	2	2	2	2		1	1		15
Grade 7	11	1	13	16	7	14	12	8			82
DP	53	10	24	34	26	29	11	30	2	4	223
SO	101	12	72	36	63	71	15	37		13	420
EO1	74	1	69	13	27	39	5	20	2		250
EO2	73	2	126	12	12	50	4	11	4	5	299
AO	41	8	60	16	121	60	3	39	5	3	356
AA	6	2	14	6	31	44		4	11		118
Uniformed Grades								28			28
Total	360	40	381	135	290	312	50	179	25	28	1800

Notes:

Figures provided are vacancies for permanent and temporary/fixed term staff (including analogous grades) at 02 January 2020 which have been approved by Departments and forwarded to NICS HR to fill.

Figures exclude vacancies in the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland and the Office of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland

Information on the location of vacancies is not readily available.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance how many people died from smoking-related conditions in each of the last five years. (AQW 932/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Smoking history is rarely recorded on death certificates. An established methodology is therefore used, based on research previously undertaken by the Health Development Agency, to derive estimates of deaths attributable to smoking.

Estimated Number of Deaths attributable to smoking in Northern Ireland, 2014-2018

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Smoking deaths	2,349	2,414	2,458	2,443	2,437

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the adequacy of regulation governing the operation of vulture funds, particularly in respect of their treatment of creditors. (AQW 1028/17-22)

Mr Murphy: This is a matter for the relevant authorities in London who are responsible for the regulation of financial services.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what expenditure is anticipated in respect of the Irish language provision included in New Decade, New Approach before the relevant legislation receives Royal Assent; and on what basis would such expenditure be incurred. (AQW 1031/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Work is ongoing with departments to quantify the various priorities identified in the New Decade, New Approach document. Until that exercise is concluded it is not possible to assess costs.

As set out in Managing Public Money (NI), where preparatory expenditure is to be incurred in advance of enabling legislation, albeit permitting, the spend can be carried on the sole authority of the Budget Act.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to detail the current cost of servicing the Executive's borrowings. (AQW 1179/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The total anticipated interest payments in 2019-20 is £58.5 million.

Of this, £51.1 million relates to the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative (RRI). This will be a cost to the Executive's Resource DEL.

The remainder relates to borrowing to fund onward lending and historic debt in respect of Ulster Savings Certificates and Ulster Development Bonds. Interest on these loans is not a cost to the Executive's DEL.

Actual figures will be reported in final outturn and shown in the 2019-20 Public Income and Expenditure account.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance when and how he plans to address NI Civil Service pay issues.
(AQW 1181/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I met with officials from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, who represent non-industrial civil servants, on 22 January. It was a constructive discussion. I appreciate the work Civil Servants do in supporting and delivering a wide range of public services and am committed to continued engagement with trade union colleagues. I will be working closely with Departmental officials to progress and resolve the NICS 2019/20 pay award for all Civil Service staff as soon as possible.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance how many wind turbines are subject to rates; and what is the approximate tax take.
(AQW 1182/17-22)

Mr Murphy: At the end of March 2019, there were 440 single wind turbines and 64 wind farms in the Valuation List. A wind farm consists of two or more wind turbines.

In the 2018-19 rating year, which is the most recent full year for which the information is available, £12.9m in rates revenue was collected from wind farms and wind turbines.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Finance whether he will use an email address for official duties that includes the ".gov.uk" designation.
(AQW 1202/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am currently using a .info departmental email address. This is hosted within the Civil Service infrastructure and held on the same email server as all other Department of Finance email accounts.

This is an internally hosted email server which meets the necessary security and protection standards.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to outline the Executive's borrowing strategy.
(AQW 1255/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive has yet to make a decision on future borrowing, however decisions on Reinvestment and Reform Initiative (RRI) borrowing for 2020-21 will be taken as part of the Budget process.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what is the current level of Executive borrowing.
(AQW 1259/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The level of outstanding debt at 3 February 2020 is £1,774 million.

Of this, £1,678 million relates to borrowing by the Executive under the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative (RRI).

The remaining debt relates borrowing to fund onward lending to local councils, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and local schools for capital projects and a small level of historic debt relating to Ulster Savings Certificate and Ulster Development bonds.

An analysis of public debt is included in the Public Income and Expenditure Account which is published each year.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Finance what discussions he has had with HM Treasury to enable departmental underspends to be reallocated at the end of each financial year to the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund for the following financial year.
(AQW 1324/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There is already a mechanism in place that allows the Devolved Administrations to carry forward unspent funding. The Budget Exchange Scheme allows the Executive to carry forward 0.6% of its Resource DEL, 1.5% of its Capital DEL and 15% of its Financial Transactions Capital DEL from one year to the next.

Department of Health

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health to outline the current provision of the drug Kuvan, used in the treatment of Phenylketonuria; and what steps he is taking to reform the Individual funding request process.
(AQW 450/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): New medicines are commissioned for use in Northern Ireland where there is substantive evidence of clinical and cost effectiveness, as determined by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE).

Sapropterin (Kuvan®) is not recommended for use by NICE, therefore it is not routinely commissioned. However in these circumstances, it can be requested by an individual patient's clinician via the Individual Funding Request (IFR) process.

The IFR process has recently undergone modernisation. A key part of the reform is the establishment of a new Regional Scrutiny Committee (RSC), which is expected to be operational shortly.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, in relation to domiciliary care packages approved by Health and Social Care Trusts and due to be implemented, how many are outstanding for (i) up to two weeks; (ii) up to four weeks; (iii) up to two months; and (iv) more than two months since being approved, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 454/17-22)

Mr Swann: The breakdown in the week beginning 20th January 2020 by Trust is:

Trust	Up to 2 weeks	2 -4 weeks	4 weeks - 2 months	More than 2 months
Belfast	163	74	158	345
Northern*	62	12	44	65
Southern	54	12	65	87
South Eastern	39	69	23	40
Western	139	31	118	89

* Due to winter / hospital pressures these figures are not yet fully validated.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health when his Department will begin the 3 free cycles of IVF.

(AQW 462/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am pleased that the New Decade, New Approach Agreement committed to providing 3 funded IVF cycles for eligible women.

The Regional Fertility Centre does not currently have the capacity to meet the demand for treatment arising from offering 3 cycles of IVF to all eligible women, as there are not enough trained staff to carry out the procedures, nor is there enough space at the premises to facilitate a higher number of patients.

My officials are currently giving urgent consideration to how this issue can be taken forward and as such I am unable to give a definitive implementation date at this stage.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to outline what invest to save opportunities exist within his Department.

(AQW 486/17-22)

Mr Swann: A number of invest to save opportunities exist within the Department of Health across a range of themes. Some examples include energy saving and other revenue releasing schemes, and a medicines efficiency programme to optimise and accelerate medicines savings. Greater investment in prevention and early intervention can also reduce demand for treatment services. For example, there are opportunities across diabetes prevention, education and foot care, immunisation and screening programmes, HIV risk reduction, and a range of prevention and early intervention programmes for children and families including the development of emotional resilience early in life.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans to address the abuse of (i) illegal drugs; and (ii) prescription drugs in West Tyrone.

(AQW 492/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Western Health & Social Care Trust, the Health & Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency work in partnership to address the issues of alcohol and drug misuse within the Western Trust Area. These partners are involved locally in the Western Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Team (WDACT) along with community, voluntary and statutory organizations, including the PSNI. WDACT works to co-ordinate, develop and deliver drug and alcohol related initiatives across the Western Trust area using a partnership approach. This includes initiatives to tackle the misuse of illicit drugs and prescription medicines.

WDACT has developed a number of initiatives such as a Local Implementation Steering Group which oversees the implementation of the local Drug and Alcohol Incident Protocol. This protocol enables organisations to work together in a co-ordinated way to provide a prompt and appropriate response to serious drug or alcohol incidents and emerging issues of concern. This is achieved through ensuring community intelligence about serious drug or alcohol incidents is shared in a prompt and appropriate manner and formally links with the regional Drug and Alcohol Monitoring and Information System.

This protocol also provides for co-ordination for relevant agencies to support local communities in responding to local concerns. A Drug and Alcohol Information Exchange Meeting also takes place on a monthly basis in the Strabane area.

In addition, a range of services focused on meeting the drug and alcohol needs of children, young people, adults and families / carers are available in each Health and Social Care Trust area across Northern Ireland. These services address all areas of substance misuse, including illicit drugs and prescription medicines.

Regionally a number of reviews are being undertaken with regard to the commissioning of Alcohol and Drugs Services, including Opioid Substitute Treatment Services, along with work to develop a successor strategy to the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) his assessment for the need to train more General Practitioners for surgeries in rural areas; and (ii) his Department's analysis of the number of additional General Practitioners required for rural areas.

(AQW 493/17-22)

Mr Swann: A General Practitioner (GP) Medical Workforce Review led by the Public Health Agency was published in June 2015. While rural areas were not distinguished specifically within that report, GP training positions are provided across the five HSC Trust areas. I am aware however that in some rural areas of Northern Ireland there are challenges in recruiting GPs.

The number of GP training places commissioned annually by the Department has been increased from 65 in 2015 to 111 in 2019 in line with the recommendations of this Workforce Review.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how the recent changes on abortion law, along with the ongoing guidance and regulatory provision and preparation, will be impacted by the restoration of devolution; and how he proposes to proceed.

(AQW 506/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 24 July 2019, the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 made provision to repeal, from 21 October 2019, the main legislation prohibiting abortion in Northern Ireland. Section 9 of the Act requires the Secretary of State to put in place by 31 March 2020 a new legislative framework based on the recommendations of the Committee for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Both the Act and the forthcoming Regulations are actions of the United Kingdom Parliament and are therefore unaffected by the restoration of devolution.

My Department awaits the response from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to the representations it received to its recent public consultation on the document 'A new legal framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland - Implementation of the legal duty under section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act 2019' and the final Regulations to be made by the UK Parliament. Thereafter the implementation of the regulations will be for my Department to take forward, for which we will be seeking funding from the NIO.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health whether his Department will provide future funding for the Northern Ireland Air Ambulance.

(AQW 519/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department provides recurrent funding of approximately £1m per annum to fund the medical aspects of the Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS). This service greatly benefits people whose lives are at risk following significant trauma. My Department has committed to a partnership funding relationship with Air Ambulance NI, who raise charity funds (including public donations) which sustains the aviation side. This partnership has been found to be a highly effective model which operates in a number of UK HEMS services.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health to detail the additional funding each Health and Social Care Trust will receive to tackle waiting lists.

(AQW 521/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise the current waiting times are unacceptable and that is why I will be seeking additional funds for 2020/21 to tackle the elective care backlog.

Additional funding to tackle waiting lists has not yet been confirmed.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health to outline (i) his Department's plan to provide three cycles of IVF treatment as per the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommendations; and (ii) if this will include same sex couples.

(AQW 542/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am pleased that the New Decade, New Approach Agreement committed to providing 3 funded IVF cycles for eligible women.

The criteria for publicly-funded IVF treatment in Northern Ireland was extended last year to include women in same sex couples.

The Regional Fertility Centre does not currently have the capacity to meet the demand for treatment arising from offering 3 cycles of IVF to all eligible women, as there are not enough trained staff to carry out the procedures, nor is there enough space at the premises to facilitate a higher number of patients.

My officials are currently giving urgent consideration to how this issue can be taken forward and as such I am unable to give a definitive implementation date at this stage.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has on the future of Bangor Hospital.
(AQW 554/17-22)

Mr Swann: Plans for a new Primary and Community Care Centre in Bangor are included in the Primary Care Infrastructure Draft Strategic Implementation Plan. The Draft Implementation Plan includes provision for a new health centre to serve the population of the North Down and Newtownards area. This will be considered alongside other capital investment priorities and will be dependent on future budget availability, value for money and affordability.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health when he will make an announcement on the future of Stroke services.
(AQW 555/17-22)

Mr Swann: The public consultation on 'Reshaping Stroke Care – Saving Lives, Reducing Disability' closed on 30 August 2019, with 19,510 responses received.

My officials are in the process of finalising the consultation analysis. I will make an announcement on the future of stroke services once I have had the opportunity to consider the analysis.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to outline what pressures his Department is currently experiencing.
(AQW 556/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is facing a number of operational challenges such as year-on-year growing demand for services, increasing numbers of older citizens with complex care needs, responding to the mental wellbeing needs of the local population, and of course budgetary pressures.

Of more strategic significance, we have a significant pressure arriving from a flawed service configuration. This issue, and the likely consequences, was clearly articulated in both the Bengoa and Delivering Together transformation documents.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what is the current shortfall in his Department's budget for this financial year.
(AQW 557/17-22)

Mr Swann: The scale of budgetary pressures that my Department has been facing in 2019/20 has been considerable against a backdrop of rising service pressures and demand. My Department has sought to manage these pressures by working closely with all parts of the HSC system and by engaging with the Department of Finance to secure additional allocations from the in-year monitoring rounds.

I welcome the outcome of the latest Monitoring Round in which my Department has been allocated additional funding to support Agenda for Change pay uplifts and to provide financial support to victims of contaminated blood. However, additional funding was not made available to address all of our needs and as a result the remaining challenges are significant. As the financial year is not yet over, and as the pressures in my Department continuously evolve, it is not possible to provide a definitive figure.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to outline his support and intention to fully implement the Bengoa report.
(AQW 558/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am committed to leading the work required, with the support of my Executive colleagues, to fully implement our transformation strategy, Health and Wellbeing 2026 - Delivering Together. The Bengoa Report was an input to this document.

It is important to note however that the full implementation of this Transformation will not be possible without additional investment, over a sustained period, above that which is required to run existing services.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health what counselling services will be available to women seeking an abortion following the introduction of the new regulatory framework on abortion on 31 March 2020.
(AQW 564/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department awaits the response from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to the representations it received to its recent public consultation on the document 'A new legal framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland - Implementation of the legal duty under section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act 2019' and the final Regulations to be made by the UK Parliament. Thereafter the implementation of the regulations will be for my Department to take forward. Until such times as there is clarity on the legal requirements it is not possible to say with certainty what that service will entail, although I anticipate that it will include counselling services.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health whether any request has been made to his Department on the part of a voluntary sector or private provider to offer abortion services following 31 March 2020.

(AQW 565/17-22)

Mr Swann: No such request has been received.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health whether funding for abortion services will be covered by the Northern Ireland block grant following 31 March 2020.

(AQW 566/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department awaits the response from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to the representations it received to its recent public consultation on the document 'A new legal framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland - Implementation of the legal duty under section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act 2019' and the final Regulations to be made by the UK Parliament. Thereafter the implementation of the regulations will be for my Department to take forward, for which we will be seeking funding from the NIO.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health how much money his Department estimates will be required to fund abortion services following the introduction of the new regulatory framework on 31 March 2020.

(AQW 567/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department awaits the response from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to the representations it received to its recent public consultation on the document 'A new legal framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland - Implementation of the legal duty under section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act 2019' and the final Regulations to be made by the UK Parliament. Thereafter the implementation of the regulations will be for my Department to take forward, for which we will be seeking funding from the NIO.

Until such times as there is clarity on the legal requirements it is not possible to say with certainty what that service will entail or how much funding will be required.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to identify land, owned by his Department, that is suitable for the planting of trees, given that Northern Ireland is the second most deforested part of Europe.

(AQW 573/17-22)

Mr Swann: DoH owned land, which is not identified for a health related service, is declared surplus and disposed of at best value in compliance with current public sector disposal guidance.

To support regeneration of new trees and wildflowers, since 2001 DoH has leased 38 acres of existing woodland located at Gransha Hospital site, to The Conservation Volunteers.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health (i) to outline his plans for reducing the current backlog of patients on waiting lists, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach; (ii) whether this will include use of the private sector; (iii) to outline the timescale; and (iv) how much funding will be allocated.

(AQW 603/17-22)

Mr Swann: Additional funding to tackle waiting lists has not been confirmed. Once the amount of additional funding available in 2020/21 is confirmed, an action plan will be developed to ensure that the sourcing and procurement of additional capacity is managed to maximise available capacity. The successful delivery of the New Decade, New Approach waiting time priority will only be achieved by securing additional IS capacity both inside and outside of Northern Ireland and will be subject to the early notification of additional funding.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health how many patients in each Health and Social Care Trust have availed of the EU Directive on cross-border health care in each of the last five years.

(AQW 604/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the number of EU Cross Border Directive applications approved in each of the last five years.

Year	2011/24/EU Cross Border Directive approval
2015/16	63
2016/17	138
2017/18	353
2018/19	904
2019/20	1119*

Notes:

*1119 approvals is for the 10 month period April 2019 to 20 Jan 2020

The nature and timing of treatment will depend on the patients clinical circumstances and may not take place in the same financial year as approval or may result in multiple treatments over different financial years.

Patients who have been given approval may decide not to proceed with treatment outside Northern Ireland.

The tables below provide a breakdown of the above approvals by patient HSCT area of residence for 2018/19 and 2019/20. In previous years this information was not recorded centrally by the Health and Social Care Board.

2018/19 breakdown by patient HSCT area

BHSCT	71
NHSCT	166
SEHSCT	104
SHSCT	228
WHSCT	335
Total approvals	904

2019/20* breakdown by patient HSCT area

BHSCT	109
NHSCT	236
SEHSCT	135
SHSCT	249
WHSCT	390
Total approvals	1119

* covering period 1 April 2019 to 20 January 2020

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health to outline the average time a patient has to wait for a (i) hip replacement; and (ii) knee replacement in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 605/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the average time waited in weeks for (i) hip and (ii) knee replacement operations in 2018-2019, the most recent period for which official statistics are available, is presented in the table below:

Average number of weeks¹ waited for (i) hip and (ii) knee replacements by trust of residence, 2018/19

Trust of residence	Hip replacement	Knee replacement
Belfast	56	65
Northern	58	74
South Eastern	58	60
Southern	56	64
Western	93	114

Source: Hospital Inpatient System, DoH.

These completed waits do not take account of any suspensions from the waiting list. It should be noted that patients who are admitted non-electively will not have a date waiting. Only elective surgeries are included.

1 Rounded to the nearest whole week.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health how many GP practices have introduced SMS/text messaging systems adapted for communication with patients with sight loss.

(AQW 609/17-22)

Mr Swann: As independent contractors. GP practices are responsible for managing their own communication systems for their patients. Information is not available on the number of practices that have introduced SMS/text messaging systems adapted for communication with patients with sight loss.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health what training has been provided to staff in relation to Making Communication Accessible to All.

(AQW 610/17-22)

Mr Swann: Making Communication Accessible for All – A Guide for Health and Social Care Staff is featured in mandatory equality, disability awareness and human rights training across Health and Social Care Trusts.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the number of retailers given fixed penalties under the Tobacco Retailers Act 2014 in each financial year from 2015/16 to 2018/19.

(AQW 611/17-22)

Mr Swann: Regulations introducing fixed penalty notices (FPNs) for a number of tobacco-related offences under the Tobacco Retailers Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 came into operation on 1 July 2016. Therefore, the issue of FPNs only became possible part way through 2016/17.

The table below includes the total number of FPNs issued for offences under the Act from 2016/17 to 2018/19. Note that FPNs can be issued to a number of individuals including shop owners, occupiers of premises and employees. The same tobacco retailer may be issued with more than one FPN for relevant offences in any given year.

Offence	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
An unregistered person carrying on a tobacco business	0	3	2
A registered person carrying on a tobacco business at premises other than those noted in the person's entry in the Tobacco Register	0	0	0
A person who fails to notify changes to the Tobacco Register	0	0	0
A person who fails to display a notice when subject to a restricted premises order	0	0	0
A person who fails to remove tobacco or cigarette papers from the retail area where a restricted premises order has effect	0	0	0
A person who sells tobacco or cigarette papers to a person under the age of 18	19	81	58
Failure to comply with a court order made in relation to the control of an automatic (vending) machine for the sale of tobacco	0	0	0
A person aged 18 or over who buys or attempts to buy tobacco or cigarette papers on behalf of a person under the age of 18 (proxy purchasing)	0	0	0
A person carrying on a retail business who sells cigarettes to any person other than pre-packaged cigarettes in their original package (singles)	0	0	1
Failure to comply with the prohibition of the sale of tobacco from an automatic (vending) machine	0	0	0
Failure to display a notice "It is illegal to sell tobacco products to anyone under the age of 18" in retail premises where tobacco is sold	0	3	1

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the procedure for recording preferred format for screening invitations and results letters on internal systems for each Health Service screening programme; and (ii) any monitoring arrangements.

(AQW 612/17-22)

Mr Swann: The procedure for recording screening invitations and results letters varies from programme to programme but does not routinely or systematically record a client's preferred format for receiving invitations and results notifications nor does it include monitoring arrangements for preferred formats. However, in most screening programmes, where the programme is made aware that someone has an additional need, such as alternative language or sensory impairment, a flag can be put on the screening information system and the additional need is managed on an individual basis for that screening episode.

In newborn and antenatal (during pregnancy) screening programmes, the offer of screening is generally given verbally (face-to-face) with screening results given verbally (face-to-face) and recorded in written format in parent /patient held manual records.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health to outline the monitoring arrangements for the Health and Social Care Board Best Practice Guidance in Creating accessible primary care services for people with sensory loss.

(AQW 613/17-22)

Mr Swann: The best practice guidance Creating Accessible Primary Care Services for People with Sensory Loss provides information and advice, primarily to GPs, to help improve access to services for people with sensory loss. GPs are

independent contractors and are responsible for arrangements within their practices to support access for patients with sensory loss. There are no arrangements in place to monitor application of the guidance in GP practices.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of hospital beds available in each hospital facility in tabular form; and how this compares with 2011.

(AQW 614/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of available overnight beds across all hospital facilities in HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland is collected on a quarterly basis. The average daily number of beds available for overnight stays for 2011 and 2018 (the latest full year of data available at present) have been provided for each hospital facility in the table below. The number of available beds is the number of beds on each ward opened overnight that were actually available for patients, measured at midnight. Beds reserved solely for day case admissions or regular day admissions are not included in these figures.

Hospital facility	Average Available Overnight Beds		% Change
	2011	2018	
Altnagelvin Area	494	465	-5.8%
Antrim	481	529	9.8%
Ards	20	20	1.3%
Bangor	20	-	-
Belfast City	489	384	-21.4%
Braid Valley	9	-	-
Cancer Centre	69	62	-10.1%
Causeway Hospital	248	240	-2.9%
Craigavon Area	474	478	0.7%
Craigavon Area PNU	74	94	27.0%
Daisy Hill	228	217	-4.9%
Dalriada	33	32	-2.2%
Downe	49	43	-12.1%
Downshire	110	72	-34.5%
Erne	210	-	-
Forster Green	22	-	-
Gransha	77	30	-60.9%
Holywell	187	117	-37.6%
Knockbracken Healthcare Park	168	118	-30.0%
Lagan Valley	100	90	-9.6%
Lagan Valley PNU	39	36	-8.9%
Lakeview	24	10	-58.3%
Longstone	78	-	-
Lurgan	51	53	4.0%
Mater Infirmorum	281	250	-11.0%
Mid Ulster	48	22	-52.9%
Moyle	18	18	-0.7%
Muckamore Abbey	234	94	-60.0%
Musgrave Park	223	264	18.2%
Omagh Hospital & Primary Care Complex	-	41	-
RBHSC	94	96	2.3%
Robinson Memorial	25	21	-16.0%

Hospital facility	Average Available Overnight Beds		% Change
	2011	2018	
Royal Maternity	126	110	-13.2%
Royal Victoria	653	670	2.5%
South Tyrone	45	36	-19.9%
South West Acute	-	226	-
St Luke's	72	24	-66.7%
Thompson House	35	36	2.9%
Tyrone & Fermanagh	93	65	-30.4%
Tyrone County	44	-	-
Ulster	548	628	14.7%
Ulster MHU	24	24	0.0%
Waterside (Ward 1-4)	71	65	-7.9%
Whiteabbey	47	44	-6.4%
Windsor	35	-	-
Young Peoples Centre	24	31	31.5%
Northern Ireland	6,493	5,854	-9.8%

Source: Trust KH03a returns.

Over the time period 2011 to 2018, there has been a 9.8% net decrease in the total number of beds available for overnight hospital stays in Northern Ireland. However, these figures should not be taken in isolation. For example, overall occupancy rate (occupied beds/ available beds) for these types of beds has remained stable between 2011 and 2018 (83.3% and 83.8%, respectively). The number of beds being made available is reflective of changing clinical practice, increasing use of day surgery, better anaesthetics, improved community care and community rehabilitation. Indeed, over the time period 2010/11 to 2018/19, overall admissions to hospital in Northern Ireland have increased by 5.2% with day case admissions increasing by 11%.

Additionally, more efficient patient pathways and bed management has resulted in shorter stays in hospital with the average overnight stays for patients in Northern Ireland falling from 6.9 in 2010/11 to 6.0 in 2018/19. As a result, fewer overnight beds have been required to meet demand.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health whether he has engaged with the Irish Government concerning the provision of abortion services following 31 March 2020.

(AQW 643/17-22)

Mr Swann: In considering the implementation of the legislative framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland, my officials have been in contact with their colleagues in both Whitehall and the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health what progress has been made in relation to the provision of additional car parking facilities for patients and staff at the Ulster Hospital.

(AQW 647/17-22)

Mr Swann: Plans are in place to construct a new 149 space car park adjacent to the new Acute Services Block at the Ulster Hospital. The facility will provide accessible car parking for patients and visitors attending the Emergency Department and Wards. The new car park will be operational prior to the opening of the Acute Services Block which is anticipated in summer 2021.

Demand for car parking at the Ulster Hospital site exceeds capacity and the Trust has implemented a Travel Plan which includes initiatives such as car sharing and use of cycles to reduce the number of staff car parking on the site. Whilst the Trust has no plans to provide additional car parking facilities for staff on the site at this time, they have worked collaboratively with Lisburn and Castlereagh Council to provide staff with an off-site park and ride facility at the Dundonald Omniplex.

In addition, the Trust has developed other options with Translink to offer public transport on the site throughout the day. These initiatives are proving to be both successful and helpful to staff.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health what action has been taken to improve mental health; and what future plans are in place to improve mental health support services.

(AQW 648/17-22)

Mr Swann: Much work has been undertaken in recent years to improve mental health services. For example, a new state-of-the-art Acute Mental Health Inpatient Unit on the Belfast City Hospital site opened in June 2019; initiatives such as the Multi Agency Triage Team, currently operating in the Belfast and South Eastern HSC Trust areas, ensures the most appropriate care possible is provided in the community when concerns about mental wellbeing are reported to PSNI and NIAS; and developments in the community, such as primary care multi-disciplinary teams, with mental health practitioners based in GP practices, will help provide better mental health services at this point of first interaction.

The roll out of the multi-disciplinary team model will continue in 20/21 as per the commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach'. This will see over a third of GP practices and their patient populations covered by the model.

However, I fully recognise that much more needs to be done to improve mental health. That is why I have made mental health one of my top priorities for my tenure as Minister.

As an Executive we have committed to publishing a Mental Health Action Plan within two months. This will provide the foundation for the development of a new Mental Health Strategy by the end of the year, which will set the strategic direction for service development and delivery for the next decade.

Transabdominal Cervical Cerclage Waiting Lists

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to outline his Department's measures to address patient waiting lists for transabdominal cervical cerclage.
(AQW 651/17-22)

Mr Swann: Cervical cerclage is a gynaecological procedure which can be performed either transabdominal or vaginal. This procedure can be performed as either an emergency to prevent pregnancy loss or as a planned procedure after a pregnancy loss. Waiting times for planned patients have increased due to the gap between funded health service capacity and patient demand in gynaecology services. HSC Trusts continue to prioritise the most clinically urgent patients.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many patients attended Emergency Departments with an emergency mental health crisis in (i) 2017; (ii) 2018; and (iii) 2019.
(AQW 653/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not currently possible for HSC Trusts to provide the information sought, as the administrative systems in use do not hold diagnostic information, as regards the reason for attendance at Emergency department, in a standardised format.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to introduce a Continuing Healthcare funding scheme in line with that available to residents of care homes in England and Wales.
(AQW 666/17-22)

Mr Swann: A public consultation on continuing healthcare was launched on 19 June 2017 and ran for a period of 13 weeks. A total of 43 consultation responses were received and analysed. I am considering the consultation responses and will announce next steps in due course.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Health how many people availed of the out of hours dentist service in each Health and Social Care Trust in the 2018/19 calendar year; and how many of these patients paid for their treatment.
(AQW 676/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are three dedicated Emergency Dental Clinics in Northern Ireland. They are based in The City Hospital Belfast (CHB), Craigavon Area Hospital (CAH) and Dalriada Urgent Care (DUC) in Ballymena. These clinics provide care and treatment for patients with urgent dental problems in the Northern, Southern, South Eastern and Belfast Trust areas.

In the 2018/19 financial year, 9421 patients attended the CHB clinic, 6154 attended the CAH clinic and 3614 attended the DUC clinic. In addition, 2158 patients who did not need to attend a clinic were provided with telephone advice by DUC. Information on the number of these patients who paid for treatment in these three clinics is unavailable.

In the Western Trust area, local dentists offer on call rotas, with urgent care being delivered in high street dental practices outside normal working hours. The number of emergency appointment sessions carried out in the Western Trust area for the 2018/19 financial year was 518 sessions. No data is held on how many patients attended each session or on related payments.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Health how many outpatient appointments were missed in the 2018/19 calendar year.
(AQW 677/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data relating to outpatient activity, including the number of appointments patients did not attend (DNA), are published annually by financial year. The most recent publication was released in August 2019 and can be found at the following link:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/hospital-statistics-outpatient-activity-statistics-201819>.

There were 126,393 appointments missed by patients in 2018/19.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) number; and (ii) cost of medical prescriptions issued in each of the last three years.

(AQW 678/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number and cost of prescription items, for which a prescription was written and then dispensed by a community pharmacist, dispensing doctor or appliance supplier, and presented for payment in each of the latest available three calendar years, are shown in Table 1 overleaf. Not all prescriptions issued are subsequently dispensed and presented for payment, so the number of prescriptions issued is not known centrally.

These items will have been prescribed by GPs, Dentists and non-medical prescribers such as nurses and pharmacists. In addition, hospice prescriptions and those written in other parts of the UK but dispensed in Northern Ireland are also included. Private prescriptions are not included.

The figures shown are presented by the calendar year in which the prescription was paid to the pharmacist; there may be a time lag where prescriptions have been dispensed by the community pharmacist, dispensing doctor or appliance supplier in a particular year, but paid the following year. The data provided only covers drugs dispensed in primary care, as drugs prescribed and dispensed in hospital cannot be captured centrally due to the use of different hospital IT systems.

Table1: Number and cost of prescription items dispensed in each of the latest available three calendar years

Calendar Year	Number of Prescription Items ¹	Cost of Prescription Items ²
2016	41,439,381	£438,563,267
2017	41,544,548	£438,012,566
2018	41,893,076	£423,404,437

Source: Prescription Cost Analysis (Published by Businesses Services Organisation)

- 1 The number of prescription items has been supplied above, as a prescription form may contain more than 1 item.
- 2 This is the Total Ingredient Cost (before discount), which is the basic cost of a drug as used in primary care, list price excluding VAT, i.e. the price listed in the national Drug Tariff or in standard price lists and is not necessarily the price that has been paid. It does not take into account any contract prices or discounts, dispensing costs or fees, so the amount that has been paid will be different.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the adult learning disability underfunding in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 683/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware of and fully acknowledge the concerns raised by families in 2016 in relation to the funding of learning disability services in the Western Trust. I understand there was an intention to launch an independent investigation into this issue but that it was not possible to agree terms of reference before the Executive fell. I will be giving this matter early consideration, informed by the views of families affected.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of mental health professionals in Strabane, broken down by clinical discipline.

(AQW 685/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table illustrates the number of mental health professionals and the associate whole time equivalent of these posts in Strabane as of 24th January 2019.

Strabane Recovery Team, Railway Rd	Number	Whole Time Equivalent
Mental health nurse	6	6
Mental health nurse support	1	0.8
Mental health social worker	3	2.1
Consultant psychiatrist	1	0.5
Sub Total	11	9.4
The Hillside Centre		
Mental health nurse	2	2
Mental health support worker	2	2
Sub Total	4	4
Total	15	13.4

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health to detail the expected waiting time for a patient to see an Orthopaedic Consultant following a referral from a GP, in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 691/17-22)

Mr Swann: The expected waiting time for a patient to see an Orthopaedic Consultant will vary depending on the orthopaedic body part sub specialty and the number of consultants who work in the subspecialty. This variation in sub specialty waiting times apply to all Trusts providing consultant led orthopaedic services.

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 Northern Ireland leaves the EU.

(AQW 692/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare (CBHD), will continue to apply to the United Kingdom until the end of the implementation period under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2020.

At the end of the implementation period the CBHD will no longer apply to the UK unless the UK comes to an agreement with the EU on this matter.

My Department is currently considering the policy options in relation to the principles within the CBHD, in the post implementation period environment.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how much public funding has been paid to the private health care sector in each of the last five years.

(AQW 702/17-22)

Mr Swann: The HSC utilises the private health care sector where in-house capacity is unable to meet demand both for core activity as well as waiting list initiatives. The amounts paid in each of the last five years are set out in the table below:

Year	Amount £m
2014/15	41.16
2015/16	35.15
2016/17	23.53
2017/18	8.29
2018/19	17.41

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Health for an update on the new Families Matter strategy, including what pre-consultation has taken place and when the new draft strategy will be ready for public consultation.

(AQW 734/17-22)

Mr Swann: Following a comprehensive pre-consultation engagement process my Department has led on the development of a draft cross-departmental Family and Parenting Support Strategy. This is currently being considered by other departments for their final views and input. It is intended to publicly consult on the draft strategy in the coming months. The pre-consultation process involved significant engagement through focus groups, surveys, interviews and consultation workshops with a wide range of key stakeholders from across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors.

When published, the strategy will replace the extant family support strategy for Northern Ireland, Families Matter.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health to outline (i) whether there is evidence that shows patients are having to visit Emergency Departments due to their inability to access local out of hours services; (ii) what short-term remedial measures will be put in place to reduce the problem; and (iii) what long-term measures does he envisage to address the structural problem within the Health Service in the Strabane area.

(AQW 739/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department is unaware of any evidence that shows patients are having to visit Emergency Departments due to their inability to access local out of hour's services.

That said Western Urgent Care (WUC), which provides out of hours services in the Strabane area, routinely reviews its operating model in order to meet the health needs of the local community and effectively manage its capacity. WUC deals with approximately 108,000 patient contacts per annum and regular patient surveys indicate high levels of patient satisfaction.

The provision of the service is a priority for the Department and we continue to work closely with the Health and Social Care Board and the OOHs providers to address the current challenges. Service improvements continue to be introduced including adjusting the skill mix of clinicians, increasing levels of nurse triage provision, employing more nurse practitioners and increasing flexibility in shift times. Work is also underway to develop a regional approach to the delivery of the service.

The Department has also been working to develop a new model for primary care across Northern Ireland based on multi-disciplinary teams working together to keep people well. As part of this, significant investments have been made in GP practices in Strabane; with the recruitment of a range of multi-disciplinary team professionals including physiotherapists, mental health workers and social workers to improve primary care delivery for service users. Work is also ongoing to secure enhancements to practice premises in Strabane to support the new model.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health for an update on (i) the regional review of capital priorities; and (ii) the business case submitted to the Department in 2014 to move the three existing learning disability day centres in North Down and Ards to two new build centres.

(AQW 743/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) My officials are currently working on a capital planning review exercise to inform a long term assessment of likely future capital requirements. The ability to take forward these proposals will be subject to future budget availability.
- (ii) The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust last resubmitted a business case for disability day centres in North Down and Ards to the Department in November 2018. The Trust reaffirmed that the development of day opportunities for people with a learning disability in North Down and Ards remains a key Trust priority and it has been included in the capital planning review mentioned above. Pending the outcome of that, the Trust has invested in the Ravara Centre

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health whether non-invasive prenatal testing is available in Northern Ireland (i) through the Health Service; or (ii) privately; and, if so, at what gestation it is offered.

(AQW 752/17-22)

Mr Swann: Non-Invasive Prenatal Testing (NIPT) is not diagnostic and an invasive diagnostic test is still required to receive a definitive diagnosis. The regional Health and Social Care Board does not commission NIPT. We have no information on private sector provision.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health how many abortions in Northern Ireland have taken place since 22 October 2019; and how many of these would be considered either illegal abortions.

(AQW 753/17-22)

Mr Swann: Provisional figures show that in the period between 22nd October 2019 and 25th January 2020 there were 5 terminations of pregnancy recorded in HSC Hospitals in Northern Ireland. These figures are provisional due to a lag with the recording and validation of clinical coding and reflect live pregnancies terminated for indications that are legally acceptable and medically approved in Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to reinstate funding previously cut from nursing bursaries as part of his attempt to solve the current staffing crisis.

(AQW 764/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am committed to supporting our student nurses and midwives. I am pleased to have been able to announce, whilst budgets have not yet been set, the post registration education budget will be increased to £10m in 2020/21 and will be further increased to £11.25m in 2021/22. The pre-registration nursing and midwifery courses commissioned by my Department are consistently oversubscribed. In this context, at this time I have no plans to increase the current bursary provision. I am pleased however that I recently secured Executive support to provide an additional 300 undergraduate places each consecutive year for the next three years.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health for an update on his Department's plans to provide additional parking at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

(AQW 766/17-22)

Mr Swann: Any plans for additional car parking on the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) site require planning approval from Belfast City Council. As part of this process the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is currently developing a site specific Travel Plan with a view to reducing the dependency on cars for travel to the RVH Site. This will build on exiting initiatives which ensure that car parking is prioritised to meet operational needs and improve patient access.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Health to outline (i) how many people in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust are waiting for cataract treatment; and (ii) the average waiting times for this treatment.

(AQW 774/17-22)

Mr Swann: In the Southern Health and Social Care Trust there were 756 patients waiting for cataract treatment on the 30th September 2019, the most recent quarter for which official statistics are available.

The average waiting time for residents in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust for cataract treatment in 2018/19 was 25.6 weeks. These completed waits do not take account of any suspensions from the waiting list. It should be noted that patients who are admitted non-electively will not have a date waiting. Only elective surgeries are included.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health whether his Department will fund the Northern Ireland Air Ambulance.
(AQW 782/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department provides recurrent funding of approximately £1m per annum to fund the medical aspects of the Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS). This service greatly benefits people whose lives are at risk following significant trauma. My Department has committed to a partnership funding relationship with Air Ambulance NI, who raise charity funds (including public donations) which sustains the aviation side. This partnership has been found to be a highly effective model which operates in a number of UK HEMS services.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health what financial provisions he is making available in 2020/21 to support the commitment to IVF treatment made in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 785/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am pleased that the New Decade, New Approach Agreement committed to providing three funded IVF cycles for eligible women.

Currently funding is provided for one cycle of IVF. Whilst a full costing will be completed as part of a scoping exercise, an estimated £8.1m per annum will be required to deliver three cycles for eligible women in the future. The estimated £8.1m cost of providing three funded cycles of IVF has been included in the Department's financial forecasts to inform the Executive's considerations.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health for an update on the redevelopment of Ulster Hospital.
(AQW 817/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Ulster Hospital is undergoing extensive redevelopment. Work is currently ongoing with the second building, Phase B3, the Acute Services Block.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health for an estimate of the cost to his Department in fully implementing the Bengoa Report.
(AQW 818/17-22)

Mr Swann: Full implementation of the Transformation agenda – as informed by Professor Bengoa - will not be possible without additional investment, over a sustained period, above that which is required to run existing services.

A programme of work began in October 2016, which has been supported by £200m over two years from the Confidence and Supply agreement. Costs for continued delivery of this programme are estimated at £150m in 2020/21, with a further £30m needed to support red flag and urgent waiting list cases, and an additional £50m required to deliver the waiting list target set out within New Decade, New Approach.

It is important to note that this does not represent the total cost of transforming all HSC services. Much of Transformation will require co-production with stakeholders as well as formal consultation. As such, it is not possible to develop detailed costed plans for the continued roll-out beyond 2020/21.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health for an update on the future of the Ravara daycare centre in Bangor.
(AQW 819/17-22)

Mr Swann: The South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust continues to invest in the Ravara Daycare Centre to improve the facility and ensure it continues to meet the needs of service users.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health what preparations have been made to control any risks associated with the coronavirus; and whether there has been any requirement for associated treatment of patients to date within the Health Service.
(AQW 823/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is in daily contact with the relevant authorities across the UK, to ensure we have a coordinated approach both in terms of evidence based guidance and communications.

A letter was issued on 24 January by the Chief Medical Officer providing guidance to clinical staff on what to do if they encounter patients with respiratory infections arriving from overseas.

The Public Health Agency leads on the operational response in Northern Ireland and they are working with the HSCB primary care and Trusts to ensure the appropriate testing, clinical pathways and communication lines are in place for dealing with any suspected cases in Northern Ireland. We will continue to ensure they have access to the most up to date scientific and medical evidence and guidance on these issues.

As of the 29 January at 15.30 there have been no confirmed cases in the UK. Systems are in place for transfer to the Infectious Disease ward in the Royal Victoria Hospital if deemed necessary for a suspected case in NI.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to (i) reduce the reliance on the private sector for provision of domiciliary care, and (ii) extend Health Service provision of these services.

(AQW 826/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is currently looking at a number of recommendations from the Power to the People report which will have an impact on future domiciliary care provision. This work involves the development of an action plan in response to which will include consideration of sustainable system building, the social care market place and equalising pay and conditions for the workforce.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the financial cost of treatments by private healthcare providers following referrals from GPs, in each of the last four years.

(AQW 827/17-22)

Mr Swann: Details of the financial cost of treatments by private healthcare providers following referral of patients by GPs is not available. Where patients are referred directly to private healthcare providers by their GP, their name is not added to an NHS waiting list and the details of the financial cost is therefore not available.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Health whether Craigavon Area Hospital will receive capital investment to improve estates in the current Assembly mandate; and whether there are plans for major capital investment in Craigavon Area Hospital to enable a new build in the next Assembly mandate.

(AQW 848/17-22)

Mr Swann: In the current Assembly mandate my Department has provided capital investment to the Southern Health and Social Care Trust for an additional CT scanner and an Aseptic Suite at Craigavon Area Hospital. An allocation of general capital has also been made to the Trust for maintenance of the estate, fleet and equipment as well as funding for ongoing investment in ICT.

The Trust has submitted a proposal for the redevelopment of the Craigavon Area Hospital site as part of a capital planning review exercise and I will consider this proposal alongside other capital investment priorities. My ability to take forward new capital projects, including the Craigavon proposal will only be possible if significant additional capital resources are made available to me.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health what support is available for Strabane Community Project.

(AQW 861/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Western Health and Social Care Trust has contracts in place with Strabane Community Project to provide a range of services to the local community including; Community Meals, Luncheon Club and Carer Support. The total value of these contracts with Strabane Community Project is in excess of £20k per year.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to outline (i) his Department's progress in addressing heart disease; and (ii) any intended service improvements or investments.

(AQW 862/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department published a revised Service Framework for Cardiovascular Health and Wellbeing in 2014, which led to a number of improvements in the quality of cardiovascular care people in Northern Ireland (NI) receive. The framework includes 42 standards, which relate to a number of specific conditions, as well as communication and patient and public involvement, health improvement and protection, medicines management, palliative and end of life care and research.

This Framework was for the period April 2014 to March 2017, and extended for a further year until March 2018. My Department has requested that the Health and Social Care Trusts continue to work in collaboration with the Service Framework lead to progress this area.

There are a range of initiatives commissioned across the Health and Social Care System to address heart disease, focussing on prevention, early detection and intervention, including smoking cessation services, obesity prevention programmes and a number of community pharmacy pilot programmes to identify undetected high blood pressure.

In addition, my Department's 'A Fitter future for All', which covers the period 2019-2022, contains a range of actions including those to improve diet and to support individuals to be more physically active.

An additional £1million investment is supporting a cardiac rehabilitation project in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, which aims to reduce rates of repeat hospitalisation for cardiac events

Future work being planned in community pharmacies includes diabetes prevention and alcohol consumption programmes, both of which are linked to development of heart disease.

The Department has recently endorsed the implementation of National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines relating to hypertension, acute and chronic heart failure.

Plans are being developed for an action plan to reduce long waiting lists for cardiac investigations; and a workforce plan for clinical physiologists who support complex diagnostic tests, pacemaker services and cardiac catheterisation laboratory work.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health given it is a centre of excellence for ophthalmology, why diabetic retinopathy screening has been removed from the Downe Hospital.

(AQW 871/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Diabetic Eye Screening Programme (DESP) in the Downpatrick area is currently a mobile service provided by screener/ graders employed by the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust (BHSCT). The service visits individual GP practices who host screening.

Any screening delivered on the Downe Hospital site is carried out in association with the on-site GP practices, rather than as a local Trust delivered service. This model remains in place, with screening continuing to be carried out on this site in recent months.

A project structure is now being established to take forward the implementation of recommendations on future DESP delivery, based on the findings from a public consultation carried out in 2019. This includes the delivery of screening at fixed sites throughout Northern Ireland. The locations of future fixed sites for screening services have not yet been determined and will be a key product of this work. In the meantime, screening will continue at GP practices including those on the Downe Hospital site until the transition to fixed site working.

The full public consultation documentation and report can be viewed at <https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/hsc-public-health-agency/nidespconsultation/>

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail any plans to redevelop or reorganise dental services in Newcastle and Ballynahinch, particularly for older people and people with special needs.

(AQW 872/17-22)

Mr Swann: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (SEHSCT) are currently in the process of modernising the Community Dental Services (CDS) to ensure patients are treated in surgeries that are of the required standard and comply with environmental standards and guidance.

The existing facilities in Newcastle and Ballynahinch are not considered fit for purpose for disability access as they do not have the appropriate equipment (such as a wheelchair tilt lift or a bariatric dental chair). In addition, they do not have suitable space for this moving and handling equipment, which is necessary to facilitate safe patient transfer and to protect staff from a work acquired injury. Further, sterile equipment is now centrally managed and there is inadequate storage on these sites for the volume of instruments needed to meet decontamination requirements.

It is intended that from 1 April 2020, the single surgery clinic in Newcastle Community Services will be provided from the CDS Clinic in Downe Hospital and the service currently provided from Ballynahinch Community Services will be provided from Lisburn Health Centre. Patients will be offered a choice regarding clinic location. The Trust will be consulting service users and the wider community.

Following this reorganisation, SEHSCT staff will be working within a larger team, in a supported environment better suited to meet complex and changing patient care needs. The new arrangements will also protect against lone working.

The SEHSCT has considered the potential impact on the provision of domiciliary dental care to elderly and housebound patients and has concluded that there should be no impact on these patients. SEHSCT will continue to provide care to many vulnerable patient groups, including those with special care needs. The provision of care to these groups should be in clinics that are fit for purpose and have the equipment needed to provide a safe service.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health how many children, supported by the Independent Guardians appointed under section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act, have been given (i) a reasonable grounds decision that they were trafficked; (ii) a positive conclusive grounds that they were trafficked; and (iii) a negative conclusive grounds decision that they were not trafficked in each of the last three years

(AQW 886/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of children who have been supported by the Independent Guardians appointed under section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act who have been given a reasonable grounds decision that they were trafficked, a positive conclusive grounds decision that they were trafficked, or a negative conclusive grounds decision that they were not trafficked, is set out in the Table 1 for the years 2018/19 and 2019/20. There was no Independent Guardian Service prior to 2018.

Table 1: The number of children who have been supported by the Independent Guardians appointed under section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act who have been given a reasonable grounds decision that they were trafficked, or a positive/negative conclusive grounds decision that they were trafficked.

	2018/19	2019/20 1
A reasonable grounds decision that they were trafficked	0	<5
A positive conclusive grounds decision that they were trafficked	9	0
A negative conclusive grounds decision that they were not trafficked	6	0

Source: HSCB; Quarterly Monitoring Return submitted by the Independent Guardian Service provider, Barnardos to the HSCB Note: Data is based on the financial year.

1 The information available for 2019/20 is up until 31 December 2019.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health how many children have been supported by the Independent Guardians appointed under section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act, broken down by (i) age; (ii) sex; and (iii) nationality in each of the last three years.

(AQW 887/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of children who have been supported by the Independent Guardians appointed under section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act broken down by age, sex, and nationality is set out in Table 1 for the years 2018/19 and 2019/20. There was no Independent Guardian Service prior to 2018.

Table1: Number of children, by age, sex, and nationality, who have been supported by the Independent Guardians appointed under section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act.

	2018/19 1	2019/20 2, 3
Age		
0 – 15 years	10	7
16 years	11	10
17 years	21	13
18 years	6	0
19 year and older	7	0
Sex		
Female	21	6
Male	34	24
Nationality		
	Afghan, Albanian, British, Bulgarian, Chinese, Democratic Rep. Congo, East Timorese, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Gambian, Iranian, Iraqi, Kuwaiti, Pakistani, Palestinian, Portuguese, Romanian, São Tomé and Príncipe, Somali, Sudanese, Syrian, Vietnamese, Zambian, Zimbabwean.	Afghan, Albania, Arab-Iranian, Bulgarian, Egypt, Eritrea, Kurdish Sorani (Iraq), Kuwaiti Bidoun, Moroccan, Pashto (Afghanistan), Portuguese, Romanian, Somalia, Sudanese, Syrian, Yemeni.

Source: HSCB; Quarterly Monitoring Return submitted by the Independent Guardian Service provider, Barnardos to the HSCB.

Note: Data is based on the financial year.

- 1 Some of the referrals were existing open, active cases to HSC Trusts prior to 2018/19.
- 2 The information available for 2019/20 is up until 31 December 2019.
- 3 The information for 2019/20 refers to new cases only. Some 41 ongoing cases from 2018/19 were carried over to 2019/20.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans for (i) the development of multidisciplinary care in the community; and (ii) the roll-out of general practice federations to provide patients with specialised point of care interventions.

(AQW 898/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Primary Care Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDT) model radically reforms how services are delivered in Northern Ireland and aligns with the vision from Northern Ireland's transformation policy, 'Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together'.

MDTs involve establishing new roles, including physiotherapists, mental health specialists and social workers. They are based in GP practices, working alongside doctors and existing practice teams. They will be supported by increased levels of health visitors and district nurses to better meet the needs of the local population.

Roll out of the MDT model began in 2018, across GP Federations in Down, Derry and West Belfast and has now expanded during 2020 into Newry and Causeway. The roll out of the model in these areas will continue during 2020/21 alongside bringing the model to another 100k people as per the commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach'. This will see over a third of GP practices and their patient populations covered by the model.

Roll out across the remaining GP Federation areas will continue, dependent on availability of appropriate resources, staffing and investment in GP accommodation, with an estimated completion date of 2026.

There are 17 fully incorporated GP Federations covering all areas of Northern Ireland. On average each Federation covers approximately 100,000 patients and 20 GP practices.

GP Federations have a central role in delivering care in a more responsive way and closer to home, through collaboration with the local health and social care community and a wide number of agencies and professionals. In designing and implementing innovative healthcare strategies and ways of delivering high quality care, new roles such as advanced nurse practitioners and practice based pharmacists are emerging as key contributors to the new approach. Since November 2018 GP Federations have also established over 50 Local Elective Care clinics, covering areas such as musculoskeletal, dermatology and vasectomy. This alternative solution to a routine secondary care referral has treated over 8500 patients to date.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health for an update on the review of parking charges for staff at hospitals.
(AQW 900/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current policy for parking charges for staff at hospitals was established in 2012 and is not currently under review.

The policy states that Health and Social Care Trusts should ensure that a reasonable allocation of spaces is made available for staff taking into consideration the overall availability of car parking on the site and balancing the needs of patients and visitors.

Recognising that car parking needs of different sites will differ, each Health and Social Care Trust is responsible for appropriate application of the policy to their own individual circumstances.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans in relation to Directive 2011/24/EU, patients' rights in cross-border healthcare in another European economic area, following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union.
(AQW 929/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare (CBHD), will continue to apply to the United Kingdom until the end of the implementation period under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2020.

At the end of the implementation period the CBHD will no longer apply to the UK unless the UK comes to an agreement with the EU on this matter.

My Department is currently considering the policy options in relation to the principles within the CBHD, in the post implementation period environment.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the actions his Department is taking to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.
(AQW 957/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is in daily contact with the relevant authorities across the UK, to ensure that we have a coordinated approach both in terms of evidence based guidance and communications.

A letter from the Chief Medical Officer providing guidance to clinical staff on what to do if they encounter patients with respiratory infections arriving from overseas was issued last week.

The Public Health Agency leads on the operational response in Northern Ireland and they are working with the HSCB primary care and Trusts to ensure the appropriate testing, clinical pathways and communication lines are in place for dealing with any suspected cases in Northern Ireland. We will continue to ensure they have access to the most up to date scientific and medical evidence and guidance on these issues. I will be liaising with Executive colleagues to ensure advice is provided to other organisations as is required.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given, or sought, by government departments or developers to the potential impact on people's health in relation to the roll out of 5G technology.
(AQW 1017/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health and the Public Health Agency have a memorandum of understanding with Public Health England (PHE) which includes arrangements for the provision of specialist technical advice on a range of matters, including radio frequency electro-magnetic fields (RF EMF). The PHE advice on 5G is publically available online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/5g-technologies-radio-waves-and-health/5g-technologies-radio-waves-and-health>, and my Department will continue to rely upon this advice and to signpost interested parties to it.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health why funding for the Barnardo's Forward Steps programme will end in April 2020; and what action he plans to take to help the families affected.

(AQW 1334/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Barnardo's Forward Steps programme is a post-diagnostic, home based intervention programme aimed at supporting families of children with an autism diagnosis. SEHSCT previously funded this programme, and BHSCT currently has a contract with Barnardo's but received notice on 20th September 2019 that the programme was closing. Trusts work in partnership with a range of organisations to provide services to families and children with autism, in line with existing public procurement policy. BHSCT is actively exploring alternative provision to provide support to families affected.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to (i) install a climbing lane at Gortcorbies on the Limavady to Coleraine road; (ii) progress the Ballykelly bypass as an integral part of the Londonderry City Deal; and (iii) ensure quick travel between the North Coast and the city of Londonderry.

(AQW 208/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): My Department is currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks. Detailed options testing has been completed and I expect to consider draft proposals and options in the coming weeks and months. Tackling regional imbalance and connecting our communities are priorities for me. I will consider any proposals for improvements to the A37 from Coleraine to Limavady and onto Derry via the A2, including Gortcorbies and Ballykelly Bypass, as part of this process. Once I have identified my preferred options and priorities, a draft document setting these out will be issued for public consultation.

With regard to the Derry City and Strabane City / Growth Deal, it is my understanding that the City Deal partners have identified regeneration in Strabane town centre and the Riverfront in Derry as their priority for any infrastructure funding that may come as part of a wider City Deal package. I understand that the Ballykelly Bypass is not included as an integral part of the Derry City and Strabane City / Growth Deal.

Finally, travel between Coleraine and Derry is facilitated at peak times by an hourly train service and express Ulsterbus Goldline services. In addition Translink has advised me that it is undertaking a feasibility study on an hourly frequency on a Sunday and additional early morning and late evening trains to connect Belfast, the North Coast and Derry.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to prioritise the upgrade of the water and sewerage systems in Limavady, given the impact the network capacity has on local development.

(AQW 253/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There is a wastewater network capacity issue which is affecting development within Limavady and I am advised by NI Water that they have developed a technical solution to upgrade the sewer network, requiring an investment of approximately £3 million.

The scheme will be delivered at the earliest opportunity during the Price Control 21 period (2021/22 to 2026/27). The prioritisation of works during any Price Control period is led by the Utility Regulator, in consultation with NI Water and its other statutory regulators. It is also subject to adequate funding being made available. As Minister I have inherited a range of capital pressures and, although I am determined to prioritise investment in water and wastewater infrastructure, I am also conscious of the need to address regional imbalance, improve connectivity and address climate change within current budget restrictions.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) why her Department hasn't enacted the legislation on the Review of Old Minerals Permissions (ROMPs); and in light of the precautionary principle (ii) how old extraction sites are allowed to operate outside of modern-day environmental standards.

(AQW 260/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The legislative provisions for the review of old mineral permissions were brought forward in 2006 as an amendment to the then Planning (NI) Order 1991 and were subsequently included within the Planning Act (NI) 2011. The proposed introduction was delayed following the consideration of concerns expressed by the quarrying industry in relation to the potential economic impact on that sector and on the construction sector at a time of economic downturn. The issue of commencing these provisions remains under consideration and I can assure you that I am committed to protecting the environment.

In terms of the control of current operations, there is a range of enforcement powers available to deal with any operator who operates beyond the scope of an existing permission. In addition, there are more recent powers introduced under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (NI) 2011 which are available to councils to deal with a range of nuisance issues which could give rise to complaints relating to the operation of older permissions.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to address congestion on Queens Road, Belfast.

(AQW 328/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While the Queens Road is owned and maintained by Belfast Harbour Commissioners (BHC), my Department works closely with the Commissioners to manage traffic and reduce congestion in the area, with a particular focus on connectivity between the Harbour Estate and the public road network at Sydenham Bypass, Middlepath Street and the M3 on and off ramps. Work undertaken to date has included the introduction of the Glider 'G2' route to Queens Road as well as the monitoring of traffic signals and traffic information within the estate by my Department's Traffic Information & Control Centre.

I am also advised that BHC is exploring immediate measures to reduce the number of unnecessary car journeys into the Harbour Estate and to promote greater use of active travel and public transport and I welcome this. BHC has submitted a planning application for a new road linking Queens Road and Sydenham Road which my officials are considering to ensure that it has a clear focus on sustainable transport. In addition my Department has also ensured closer working in recent months with BHC in the development of a Transport Masterplan, which is expected to incorporate strategic improvements to all modes of transport within the Harbour estate.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to introduce 20 mph speed limits in urban areas where schools are coping with increasing road traffic issues.

(AQW 331/17-22)

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 and I am pleased that there are currently over 700 locations in Northern Ireland where the speed limit has already been reduced to 20mph.

My Department will continue to reduce speed limits to 20mph, at suitable locations, including at schools in urban areas.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the (i) mileage; and (ii) age of the buses operating with (a) Metro; and (b) Ulsterbus; and what replacement programme is in place to renew those at the end of their operating life.

(AQW 333/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Currently Translink is working to average targets for bus replacement of 8 years for both Belfast Metro and Ulsterbus. At the time of writing the Belfast Metro fleet has an average age of 7.58 years and an average mileage of 227,400 miles. The Ulsterbus fleet has an average age of 10.16 years with an average mileage of 325,120 miles. The current fleet age reflects the constrained budgets under which my Department and Translink has been working over the past few years.

It is important that investment is made to purchase new buses and coaches in order to provide comfortable and reliable bus services across the North that will attract more people to using public transport and connect communities here. Officials in my Department continue to work with Translink to explore a range of options. Building on the procurement of three Hydrogen buses as a pilot, I am keen to avail of further opportunities to utilise zero and ultra-low emission vehicles to deliver on my ambition to decarbonise public transport and ensure we are playing our role in addressing the climate emergency. This is likely to require significant resources and the pace with which I can deliver this change will be determined by the budget made available to my Department.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the provision of a full programme of grass cutting in 2020/21 in North Down.

(AQW 351/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have inherited severe budgeting constraints, that have resulted in a reduced routine maintenance service which allows for 2 cuts per year in both urban and rural areas. This policy is applied across Northern Ireland.

As budgets for 2020/21 have not as yet been finalised, the approach for grass cutting and indeed other maintenance functions is not known at this time.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to address the backlog of repairs in relation to the maintenance and fixing of broken streetlights in West Belfast.

(AQW 356/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have inherited severe budgetary challenges and resources are not currently available to my Department to provide a full street lighting repair service. As a result, outages are taking longer than usual to be repaired. I can assure the member that priority is being given to hazardous electrical defects and group outages and that my officials are doing all that

they can, within available budgets, to complete other repairs in as timely a fashion as possible. I understand this is an issue of concern for the public and I am committed to working to find solutions

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to address the backlog in relation to the maintenance of grass verges and other overgrown areas across West Belfast.

(AQW 357/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Severe budgetary constraints have had a significant impact on road maintenance service delivery in recent years. As a result, my Department has been forced to reduce its routine road maintenance activities and prioritise delivery of essential services for maintaining public safety and protecting the transport network.

At present all Department owned and maintained grassed areas are cut twice during the growing season. In the West Belfast area these were first cut in May / June 2019 with the second cut carried out in September / October 2019.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to extend the provision of e-car public charge points in under-resourced constituencies.

(AQW 392/17-22)

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, creating a network whereby no electric vehicle driver in the North is more than 10 miles from a Fast charge point, or 30 miles from a Rapid charge point at any stage of their journey. The e-car public charge point network in Northern Ireland 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.

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 explore all options and new solutions to enhance our infrastructure, improve lives and tackle the climate emergency.

My Department closely monitors funding opportunities for the installation of additional charge point infrastructure. My officials will work with commercial providers to ensure that the installation of any additional charge point infrastructure remains fit for purpose commensurate with growth including in under-resourced constituencies

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the timescale for release of funding to deliver the Carryduff Greenway.

(AQW 401/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Carryduff Greenway scheme is a Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council project. My Department provided a small amount of funding to assist in the development of a feasibility study and a detailed design.

I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints and therefore have to look carefully at solutions to help support the delivery of projects to meet my priorities of connecting our communities and enhancing our environment. Over the coming weeks I want to carefully consider how the provision of greenways and other cycling infrastructure can assist as part of my vision to greater sustainable transport options that connect communities and improve lives.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the timescale under which she will review progress of Translink Future Ticketing System, which was originally scheduled to be in place across bus routes by 2019.

(AQW 402/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In 2016 Translink commenced a project to update their ticketing system. The first phase of Translink's Future Ticketing System was the successful introduction of the off-vehicle Glider Ticketing System in September 2018. In its first year of operation, the Glider ticketing system facilitated a significant increase in ticket sales and passenger numbers over the Metro routes on the same corridors in the previous year.

With rapid advances in ticketing technology, Translink responded in 2019, by further developing the Future Ticketing System specification to upgrade to the most modern technology offering Contactless Credit & Debit Card Payments on bus and train with daily and weekly capping, offering additional benefits to passengers. This required DoF approval for an addendum of the original Business Case following which the Department issued a revised Letter of Offer on 13 November 2019 incorporating the new Accounts Based Ticketing element in the overall project.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions he has had with the Minister of Health concerning the potential for allowing social care workers to use bus lanes in the event of incidents causing delays to traffic during rush hour.

(AQW 405/17-22)

Ms Mallon: No discussions to date have taken place between myself and the Minister of Health on this particular issue. I can advise that medical practitioners are allowed access to bus lanes in an emergency.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) what measures are in place; and (ii) what work has been implemented to tackle loneliness.

(AQW 411/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department delivers a number of transport measures which are focussed on people most at risk of loneliness through social exclusion.

One of the most important measures in tackling social exclusion is the delivery of our extensive public transport system which aims to connect people safely and enable access to social and economic opportunities, particularly for our more vulnerable and deprived communities. This access to public transport is further supported by the NI Concessionary Fares Scheme which was established to promote access to public transport through discounted fares for specific categories of users; a number of whom are at risk of loneliness and social isolation.

There are also a range of services delivered through the Rural Transport Fund and the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities including the Dial-a-Lift scheme, Disability Action Transport Scheme, Shopmobility and Easibus.

The Blue Badge Scheme is another initiative which is supported by my Department, providing an important service for people with severe mobility problems, enhancing access to our towns and cities, and addressing a key barrier to social inclusion.

All of these measures help to tackle loneliness and make an important contribution to the daily lives of a substantial number of people right across Northern Ireland.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Knockmore Lisburn to Antrim railway line.

(AQW 424/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the importance of improving rail connections in building connectivity and improving people's lives across Northern Ireland. I am committed to working to better connect communities, improve opportunities and protect our environment. Given the severe and challenging budget constraints I have inherited, I will be assessing the pressures across my department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead. At this stage, it is too early to comment on whether funding will be available to reopen the railway line between Knockmore and Antrim.

My Department is currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan which will help inform my priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks. I will be putting the draft plan out for public consultation and would encourage you and your constituent to respond.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to support the departmental capital grants scheme in relation to the Greenway Strategy.

(AQW 434/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints and therefore have to look carefully at solutions to help support the delivery of projects to meet my priorities of connecting our communities and enhancing our environment.

Over the coming weeks I want to carefully consider how the provision of greenways can assist as part of my vision to enable greater sustainable transport options that connect communities and improve lives.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the progress of a Cookstown bypass.

(AQW 453/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Design and development work on the proposed A29 Cookstown Bypass has made significant progress.

I recognise that many in the local community support the provision of the Cookstown Bypass. Unfortunately, I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints, but I am committed to working to find solutions that deliver better for our communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland.

I will be assessing the pressures across my department reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead. It is, therefore, too early to comment on specific schemes.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure when dropped kerbs will be installed in Westrock Gardens, Belfast.

(AQW 459/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Officials from our Roads Eastern Division have recently assessed Westrock Gardens for the provision of dropped kerbs and a scheme at this location is currently ranked 17th on the prioritised list of locations awaiting inclusion in a programme of works.

I fully recognise the benefits that would result from this work. However, given the limited budget available for works of this nature in the current financial year and the competing demands that I will need to consider when my Department's budget for next year is set, I am unable to provide you with a definitive timescale at present.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how she will ensure affordable, accessible transport will be delivered by the Community Transport network; and (ii) when will issues in relation to the section 10B permit be resolved.
(AQW 466/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) I recognise the valuable role that the Community Transport network plays in connecting people, some of whom are the most vulnerable in our society, to opportunities including accessing essential local services and more actively participating in society. Community transport provides opportunities to enhance lives by increasing access to local services and allows communities to more actively participate in society. The severe constraints in my Department's budgets over recent years has resulted in reduced funding across a range of areas including community transport creating significant pressures. I am currently assessing those pressures across my Department reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead. I will be bringing a clear focus on connecting people through sustainable and accessible public transport services. I look forward to assessing all options to develop affordable, accessible community transport.
- (ii) I understand there have been a number of concerns regarding 10B Permits, in particular the Department's guidance for operators. My Department is continuing to liaise with the Department for Transport (DfT) to determine the implications for Northern Ireland of the recent High Court Judgement made in England on non-commercial operations and any revised guidance which DfT may issue for operators on this matter.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will explore the feasibility of a railway stop in central Craigavon.
(AQW 472/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the potential which additional halts on our railway network could provide to areas such as Craigavon. As I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints with significant pressures across my Department, I will be assessing these pressures reflecting my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead. It is, therefore, too early to comment on when funding will be available to open additional railway stations within the rail network.

My Department is currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will help inform my priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks, including the potential for new railway stations. I expect to consider draft proposals and options in the coming weeks.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will explore how the proposed high speed rail link between Belfast and Dublin could be used to improve economic opportunities for towns along the route such as Lurgan, Craigavon and Portadown.
(AQW 473/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The "New Decade: New Approach" agreement set out the Irish Government's commitment to a feasibility study into a potential high-speed rail connection between Belfast, Dublin and Cork. Reflecting this commitment, I have already asked my officials to engage urgently with their counterparts in the south to support the study and I will also be raising it with my ministerial counterpart in the south in the coming weeks. Ensuring effective all-island connectivity that supports the economy and local communities is a key priority for me and I will therefore be keen to ensure that the proposed feasibility study examines the costs and benefits of a wide range of issues including the potential economic opportunities for towns and communities along the route.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures are planned to be put in place at the Clare crossroads, Clare Road, Waringstown to improve road safety.
(AQW 474/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is aware of a collision history at this crossroads and I am very much aware of the very recent tragic loss of a lady's life. Officials have implemented a number of safety improvements over the years. These have included improving the visibility, providing High Friction Surfacing, erecting 'Give Way' and 'Junction Ahead' warning signs with yellow backing boards and also putting down SLOW road markings. These measures are in addition to the advance direction signs on both the Crowhill Road and Lowtown Road highlighting the junction.

I understand the latest injury collision figures indicate that this location still experiences a number of collisions. I have therefore asked my officials to carry a further assessment to identify any common causes and determine if further engineering measures are appropriate.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she will introduce a Development Management Practice Note for Environmental Impact Assessments as it relates to the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 to replace the Development Control Advice Note 10, which was last revised in 2012.
(AQW 477/17-22)

Ms Mallon: After the introduction of the 2017 EIA regulations, the Department has appointed an external EIA expert to help produce new EIA practice guidance to assist planning staff in applying the regulations. This guidance will be informed by engagement with planning staff and the intention is to produce the first part of the guidance by the summer.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for a list of all unadopted roads in the Strangford constituency which are subject to Private Streets Order legislation where the other party to the road bond has ceased to trade; and (ii) what steps have been taken to adopt these roads.

(AQW 478/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are four unadopted development sites in the Strangford constituency which are subject to Private Streets Order Legislation and where the other party to the Road Bond has ceased to trade. They are as follows:

- Manor Lane, Kilmood, Killinchy
- Rockfield, Quarry Road, Killinchy
- McBriars Meadow, Carrodore
- Avonmore Court, The Cotton, Donaghadee

My officials are currently taking enforcement action on all sites through Article 11 of the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order. Contractors are presently completing the sites to the required standards for adoption and it is expected that works on the individual sites will be completed as follows:

- Manor Lane, Kilmood, Killinchy - May 2020
- Rockfield, Quarry Road, Killinchy - May 2020
- McBriars Meadow, Carrodore - June 2020
- Avonmore Court, The Cotton, Donaghadee - February 2020

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has plans to increase parking capacity at Dundonald Park and Ride.

(AQW 479/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that Dundonald Park and Ride is now at full capacity, due to the overwhelming success of Glider. There is unfortunately no adjacent land available to extend the site so officials are looking urgently at other options to increase capacity. The way forward is likely to involve the purchase of a site or sites and it is not possible at this stage to confirm precise timescales until that work is completed and until more clarity is received on the Budget allocation available to me in the years ahead.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Ballynahinch Bypass.

(AQW 480/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very aware that many in the local community support the provision of a bypass at Ballynahinch. Unfortunately, I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints. However, recognising the importance of the Ballynahinch bypass and many others schemes within my Department, I am committed to working to find solutions that deliver better for our communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland.

I will be assessing the pressures across my department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in “New Decade: New Approach” and the budget made available for the period ahead. However, it is too early to comment on individual schemes.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure why the planned Phase 3 upgrade of the Derry-Coleraine railway line has been shelved.

(AQW 496/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the significant interest in the future delivery of Phase 3 upgrade of the Derry –Coleraine railway line. I am committed to addressing regional imbalance and better connecting communities across the North. As you will be aware, I have inherited severe budgetary constraints in my department. Despite these challenges, I can assure you that I am committed to working to find solutions that will deliver for our communities and improve lives.

I am currently assessing the pressures across my department reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in “New Decade: New Approach” and the budget made available for the period ahead.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans for road resurfacing of Cornshell Fields, Derry.

(AQW 497/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise that the conditions of roads across the north is a matter of concern for many communities. However I have inherited a severe and challenging budget across my Department which is impacting on road resurfacing and other areas. In respect of Cornshell Fields, Derry, my Department hopes to be in a position to resurface this road during the latter part of the 2020/21 financial year. This is subject to the availability of funding and the recently completed utility works showing no signs of deterioration which would impact the life of the planned resurfacing.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to secure funding for Phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine rail improvements.

(AQW 539/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the significant interest in the future delivery of Phase 3 upgrade of the Derry –Coleraine railway line. I am committed to addressing regional imbalance and better connecting communities across the North. As you will be aware, I have inherited severe budgetary constraints in my department. Despite these challenges, I can assure you that I am committed to working to find solutions that will deliver for our communities and improve lives.

I am currently assessing the pressures across my department reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in “New Decade: New Approach” and the budget made available for the period ahead.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to carry out a feasibility study for a direct Derry to Dublin train service.

(AQW 541/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently developing options which would provide service connections between Derry and Dublin utilising the existing rail track. I recognise the importance of improving rail connections in building connectivity and improving peoples’ lives across Northern Ireland. Given the severe and challenging budget constraints I have inherited, I will be assessing the pressures across my department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in “New Decade: New Approach” and the budget made available for the period ahead before taking any final decisions on this area.

My Department is also developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan which will inform priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks. Tackling regional imbalance and connecting communities are priorities for me. I expect to consider draft proposals and options in the coming weeks and months.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) plans to redevelop Parkgate Quarry into a recycling and landfill facility; and (ii) a timeline for making a final decision on it.

(AQW 543/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department is processing two planning applications at Parkgate Quarry; one for a Waste Transfer and Recycling Facility and a second for a Landfill Facility for the deposit of inert construction & demolition wastes.

I expect that my officials will be in a position to make a recommendation to me on these applications later this year.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure in the face of the climate change emergency, to outline what actions or policies her Department will (i) take; or (ii) adopt, (a) immediately; (b) in the short term; and (c) in the longer term to help reduce carbon emissions.

(AQW 547/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In relation to climate change mitigation, I am focussed on continuing and advancing work to encourage a modal shift to walking and cycling; increase the use of clean public transport and encourage people to switch to greener transport options. I fully recognise the importance of having a modern, reliable public electric changing infrastructure in providing confidence for users of low emission vehicles and in respect the connectivity improvements this would bring, particularly for rural areas. In coming months, I will be working to identify actions to support the decarbonisation of transport and infrastructure services that will help to reduce carbon emissions and ultimately enhance citizens lives and our communities as well as our economy and environment.

I will quickly determine my longer term priorities to address the climate emergency we face, taking into account the new Executive’s wider Programme for Government and commitments made within the New Decade, New Approach agreement in relation to climate change. During the next 2 years, my focus will be on using available resources to green our infrastructure and deliver sustainable transport that connects communities, availing of the opportunities that arise when we collaborate within and beyond government. In particular, I look forward to working with my Executive colleagues to tackle these critical climate change, energy and air quality challenges in a holistic and coordinated way.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the proposed plans for the (i) Armagh North and West Link; and (ii) Armagh East Link roads.

(AQW 559/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The development for the Armagh North and West Link currently involves environmental, economic and engineering assessments with the objective of identifying a preferred route for the scheme.

A preferred route for the A28 Armagh East Link has been identified and was published in August 2019.

My Department is currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks.

Once I have identified my preferred options and priorities, I will issue a draft plan for public consultation.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) why the delivery of the cycle strategy is behind schedule; and (ii) what measures are being taken to address this.

(AQW 560/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department has completed six cycle and walking schemes since 2016: Alfred Street and Upper Arthur Street segregated cycle lane; Durham Street, College Square North segregated cycle lane; College Street, Queen Street scheme; Middlepath Street scheme; Broadway Roundabout walking and cycling link to Bog Meadows; Comber Greenway improvements and widening.

My Department has been operating under severe budgetary constraints for some years now. In addition to the delivery of Executive flagship projects, I am committed to doing what I can to connect communities, and promote safer, greener active sustainable modes of transport, within the budget available.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to carry out a feasibility study for a Derry to Sligo railway route.

(AQW 561/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the significant interest in the future delivery of Phase 3 upgrade of the Derry –Coleraine railway line. I am committed to addressing regional imbalance and better connecting communities across the North. As you will be aware, I have inherited severe budgetary constraints in my department. Despite these challenges, I can assure you that I am committed to working to find solutions that will deliver for our communities and improve lives.

I am currently assessing the pressures across my department reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in “New Decade: New Approach” and the budget made available for the period ahead.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to secure funding for Phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine rail improvements.

(AQW 562/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the significant interest in the future delivery of Phase 3 upgrade of the Derry –Coleraine railway line. I am committed to addressing regional imbalance and better connecting communities across the North. As you will be aware, I have inherited severe budgetary constraints in my Department. Despite these challenges, I can assure you that I am committed to working to find solutions that will deliver for our communities and improve lives.

I am currently assessing the pressures across my department reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in “New Decade: New Approach” and the budget made available for the period ahead.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Ulster Canal Restoration Project.

(AQW 586/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Ulster canal restoration project has been taken forward to two phases. In phase one a short length of new lateral canal together with a new navigation arch beside Derrykerrib Bridge on the River Finn were completed in the autumn of 2018. Works relating to the installation of a new floating mooring facility at Castle Saunderson were completed in October 2019 and the navigation channel from Upper Lough Erne to Castle Saunderson (circa 2.5 km) is now open for boating.

In relation to phase two, funding is now in place and a commission to investigate sourcing a sustainable water supply is ongoing with completion expected in April 2020. Work is also ongoing on a tender to develop a vision for the canal zone in this section of restoration. Work relating to land requirements and purchase arrangements for this section of the restoration has also commenced.

Both phases of the project have been funded by the Irish Government.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to release funding for the necessary upgrades of the A32 from Omagh to Enniskillen.

(AQW 587/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A route improvement strategy for the A32 road between Omagh and Enniskillen has been developed and it contains nine schemes. Two schemes, costing approximately £10m have been delivered. A third scheme is underway and has completed the necessary statutory processes and design stage.

Recognising the importance of investment in water and roads infrastructure, I am committed to working to find solutions that deliver better results for our communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland. I will be assessing capital pressures across my Department including commitments made in New Decade: New Approach within the budget made available to me for the period ahead. It is therefore too early to comment on specific schemes such as the A32 - Omagh to Enniskillen.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the new Regional Strategic Transport Action Plan will prioritise (i) the A4 Enniskillen bypass; and (ii) the Fivemiletown bypass.

(AQW 588/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks. Tackling regional imbalance and connecting communities are priorities for me. I expect to consider draft proposals and options in the coming weeks and months.

I will consider any proposals for improvements to the A4 between Ballygawley and Belcoo, including Enniskillen Bypass and Fivemiletown Bypass, as part of this process. Once I have identified my preferred options and priorities, I will issue a draft plan for public consultation.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the new Regional Strategic Transport Action Plan will prioritise road investment based on road safety and historical underinvestment.
(AQW 589/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP). Potential road, rail or public transport projects are being tested against a framework of economic, environmental and social objectives including safety and connectivity. I am also conscious of the need to address regional imbalance.

Once I have identified my preferred options and priorities, I will issue a draft plan for public consultation.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether his Department has plans to resurface Nancy's Lane, Strabane.
(AQW 590/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Nancy's Lane in Strabane is a stretch of road of over 500m in length. I understand that 180m of the lane that adjoins the Derry Road is adopted and maintained by my Department and is in a satisfactory condition. The remaining section of Nancy's Lane is in private ownership and therefore cannot be included in a Departmental resurfacing programme. Should action be taken by the owners to bring this stretch up to an appropriate standard, it could then be considered for adoption and future maintenance.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) when the public inquiry on the A1 Junctions Phase 2 Strategic Road Improvement Scheme will conclude; and (ii) what EU money has been secured for this scheme.
(AQW 598/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Public Inquiry on the A1 Junctions Phase 2 Strategic Road Improvement Scheme will commence on 11 March 2020 and is estimated to last 3 days.

My Department secured 1,350,000 Euro of EU funding through the Connecting Europe Facility towards development costs for the scheme, up to the end of December 2020.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are protocols between her Department and local government for the maintenance of (i) unregistered land; (ii) unadopted land; and to give her assessment of their effectiveness.
(AQW 625/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are no protocols in place between my Department and local councils to maintain land for which no owner can be found.

My Department's maintenance responsibilities only extend to land and property that my Department owns and the public road network.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will review the Car Parking Facilities in Existing Social Housing Estates Policy with a view to the inclusion of access for emergency service vehicles.
(AQW 626/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the difficulties that growing levels of car ownership can create in many older social housing developments and the demand it creates for parking facilities. My Department is available and willing to work to develop solutions in partnership with housing representative groups, where road safety or traffic progression issues are identified.

Departmental officials already assess traffic progression issues when considering such requests for parking facilities.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) a timeline for the decision on the north-south Glider route; (ii) what factors will be considered when deciding between the Antrim Road and the Shore Road on the North Belfast side; and (iii) whether (a) the absence of an existing rail link; and (b) an expanding population at Glengormley and Mallusk will be factors in considering the Antrim Road corridor.
(AQW 631/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A north-south Glider route is one of the projects identified for inclusion in the Belfast Region City Deal. The next stages will require close working across all departments and with the other Belfast Region City Deal partners, including to reach agreement on funding and on which projects are most capable of delivering the City Deal objectives. To that end, my officials are working closely with the councils and other partners to take forward a feasibility and options appraisal which will

help in identifying route options and will be subject to public consultation. This work should be completed by the end of this year and will take into account the other factors raised in the Member's question.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps her Department is taking to expedite the Pond Park Link Road scheme.

(AQW 640/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The North Lisburn Feeder Road (also known as the Pond Park Link Road) is a developer led and funded scheme. Officials in my Department have, however, been working closely with the North Lisburn Development Consortium to progress Phase 3 of this scheme.

A planning application for the new road is currently being considered by Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council and other key stakeholders. Once planning permission for the new road is granted and all necessary lands acquired, then construction can commence. My Department is committed to the delivery of Phase 3 of the North Lisburn Feeder Road as soon as reasonably possible thereafter and officials will continue to provide the resources needed to assist the North Lisburn Development Consortium plan and deliver this new road.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the maintenance budget allocated to each roads division.

(AQW 642/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current 2019-20 budget for my Department's maintenance by road division, set prior to my appointment, is detailed in the table below.

Division	2019-20 Budget		
	Resource Maintenance	Capital Maintenance	Total Maintenance
Eastern	£9.639m	£12.568m	£22.207m
Northern	£9.608m	£21.687m	£31.295m
Southern	£12.311m	£25.494m	£37.805m
Western	£12.049m	£29.168m	£41.217m
Total	£43.607m	£88.917m	£132.524m

I am advised that resources for road maintenance are allocated to Divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity. Note the figures provided includes funding for both external and internal contractors who carry out maintenance activities in respect of my Department's road divisions.

A further £1m was announced by the Finance Minister on 27 January reflecting the January Monitoring outcome. I will decide shortly on the allocation of this funding.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department intends to mirror the United Kingdom's plans of phasing out of diesel-only trains by 2040.

(AQW 654/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In Northern Ireland Translink has developed plans to reduce the dependency on fossil fuels moving its bus and rail fleets towards zero emission, zero carbon technologies. The company continues to engage with manufacturers to look at different technology options including electrification, hydrogen, battery and bi-mode options for rail.

In coming months, I will be working to identify actions to support the decarbonisation of transport, taking into account the new Executive's wider Programme for Government and commitments made within the New Decade, New Approach agreement in relation to climate change.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what support her Department has provided Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, including its legacy Councils, for the installation of e-car charging points.

(AQW 655/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In 2010, the former Department for Regional Development and the former Department of the Environment formed a consortium of public and private sector organisations including Larne and Ballymena Borough Councils to deliver a network of 337 charge points to support the introduction of electric vehicles in the transport sector.

Following this, the then Department for Regional Development led a public sector estate workplace charge point project to assist public sector organisations to install charge points. This project provided all local councils with the opportunity to avail of the grant to install e-car charge points provided by the Office for Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV). I understand that Ballymena, Carrickfergus and Larne Borough Councils chose not to take part in the project at this time.

My officials continue to provide advice and guidance to Councils interested in installing public charge point infrastructure and recently met with officials from Mid & East Antrim Borough Council. The meeting was to discuss the Residential Charge Point Scheme, OLEV funding and the public charge point infrastructure.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to identify land, owned by her Department, that is suitable for the planting of trees, given that Northern Ireland is the second most deforested part of Europe.
(AQW 660/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the multiple benefits that woodland creation can provide for society, including public access for health and well-being, carbon sequestration, increasing biodiversity and landscape improvement. My Department's environmental procedures in respect of major road projects promote the incorporation of native species trees and plants. There are plans to plant 114,000 trees as part of the A6 Randalstown – Castledawson dual carriageway project and a further 150,000 trees in association with the A6 Derry – Dungiven scheme, both of which are currently under construction.

In addition, Translink is currently developing a Carbon Strategy which will include the identification of land suitable for all types of planting including trees, hedgerows and wildflowers to protect and enhance biodiversity and investigate how this could be used to offset carbon to the benefit of Northern Ireland. As the second biggest landowner in the province with 11,000 hectares, NI Water has been working with the Woodland Trust for some time and also has plans to engage with Forestry Service. Working with partner organisations, the company is keen to explore how further tree planting could be undertaken. My Department, along with our partners, will continue to explore opportunities to enhance tree planting on our estate.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether she plans to locate a pedestrian crossing in Loughbrickland, Co Down; and (ii) if not, whether she can consider one.
(AQW 668/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Over the years a number of traffic surveys associated with the provision of a controlled pedestrian crossing in Loughbrickland have been carried out by my officials. The most recent survey was carried out in June 2017.

When assessed against the current policies that I have inherited from previous Ministers, the analysis of need indicated that it fell well below the minimum criteria required to allow provision of a pedestrian crossing. As my Department is unaware of any significant changes to alter this assessment, there are no immediate plans for a pedestrian crossing but I shall be reviewing in due course the arrangements for making such assessments to ensure that the approach presently in place remains fit for purpose.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to enhance e-car charging infrastructure.
(AQW 673/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC rapid charge point in Northern Ireland, creating a network whereby no electric vehicle driver in Northern Ireland is more than 10 miles from a Fast charge point, or 30 miles from a Rapid charge point at any stage of their journey. The e-car public charge point network in Northern Ireland 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.

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.

My Department closely monitors funding opportunities for the installation of additional charge point infrastructure. My officials will work with commercial providers to ensure that the installation of any additional charge point infrastructure remains fit for purpose commensurate with growth.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she plans to update the current Road Safety Strategy.
(AQW 697/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety I want to work collaboratively with partners to reduce death and serious injury on our roads.

The current Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy expires in December 2020. Initial work to inform the way forward has already commenced. This work is at a very early stage with a lot more research needing to be done.

I want to take the time to ensure my decision on how we proceed following the expiry of the current Strategy is as informed as possible. Reducing road death and serious injuries is an important aspect of improving wellbeing for all.

I expect to be in a position to make a decision on the current Strategy's successor later this year.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the expected costs of (i) the A24 eastern bypass of Ballynahinch; (ii) the A29 eastern bypass of Cookstown; and (iii) the A4 southern bypass of Enniskillen; and when she plans to bring forward an up-to-date cost-benefit analysis for each project.
(AQW 698/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current estimated cost of the projects is within the following ranges:

- A24 Ballynahinch Bypass - £35m to £45m
- A29 Cookstown Bypass - £30m to £40m
- A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass - £25m to £30m

I will be assessing the financial pressures across my Department, alongside the commitments in the New Decade, New Approach and the budget period ahead. It is therefore too early to comment on individual schemes.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans, on safety grounds, to speed up the delivery of the five proposed grade-separated junctions on the A1 road between Hillsborough and Banbridge.

(AQW 701/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Improving connectivity between Belfast and Dublin is a key priority for me, as is promoting road safety. I am also very aware just how important the proposed A1 improvements are for the many people who have expressed their support for the scheme, especially those who have lost loved ones.

I am therefore keen to advance improvements on this key strategic route as soon as possible following completion of the statutory processes but, until there is more clarity on the budgetary position, it is difficult to give a precise funding commitment.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans to improve road safety at the Grasmere junction, near Ballycastle Road, Coleraine.

(AQW 707/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The legislation to allow the introduction of the 50MPH speed limit associated with the recent Ballycastle Road Roundabout improvement scheme, which includes the Grasmere junction, has recently been made and it is anticipated that the relevant signage will be erected in the coming weeks.

The effectiveness of this measure in terms of road safety will be kept under review by my Department, in conjunction with the PSNI.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on Phase 3 of the Londonderry to Coleraine rail improvements.

(AQW 718/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the significant interest in the future delivery of Phase 3 upgrade of the Derry –Coleraine railway line. I am committed to addressing regional imbalance and better connecting communities across the North. As you will be aware, I have inherited severe budgetary constraints in my department. Despite these challenges, I can assure you that I am committed to working to find solutions that will deliver for our communities and improve lives.

I am currently assessing the pressures across my department reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in “New Decade: New Approach” and the budget made available for the period ahead.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans to update Coleraine railway station as part of Phase 3 of the Londonderry to Coleraine rail improvements.

(AQW 719/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In advance of the last years Open Championship at Portrush, improvements works were carried out at Coleraine Station to facilitate the then projected increase in passenger numbers through the station during the week of the Championship. Translink carried out £1.3m of improvement works which included new lifts to provide fully accessible access to the platforms as well as updating other facilities in the concourse area.

The Phase 3 element of the project focuses on the upgrade of the line between Castlerock to Eglinton. The project appraisal for Phase 3 does not include works to upgrade the Coleraine Station.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the timetable for the introduction of a Glider route in South Belfast.

(AQW 723/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A south-north Glider route is one of the projects identified for inclusion in the Belfast Region City Deal. The next stages will require close working across all departments and with the other Belfast Region City Deal partners, including to reach agreement on funding and on which projects are most capable of delivering the City Deal objectives. To that end, my officials are working closely with the councils and other partners to take forward a feasibility and options appraisal which will help in identifying route options. This work should be completed by the end of this year.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many Drinking Water Inspectorate Enforcement Notices have been issued against Northern Ireland Water; and (ii) what action has been taken to resolve these.

(AQW 730/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Drinking Water Inspectorate, a unit within the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, issue Drinking Water Enforcement Notices to ensure suitable long term measures are put in place by NI Water whenever necessary to reduce any potential risks to consumers.

In the period 2015 to 2020 there have been 11 Enforcement Notices issued against NI Water by the Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI).

NI Water provided undertakings to be completed for each of the enforcement notices which were accepted by the DWI, in order to secure compliance with NI Water's duty to supply wholesome water.

Details of these Enforcement Notices can be found on the DAERA website at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/duties-drinking-water-inspectorate-dwi>

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail the cost of upgrading sewerage capacity in towns and villages where new connections have been refused; and (ii) whether provision has been made for this in draft budget proposals. **(AQW 731/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: NI Water's ability to make improvements to the sewerage infrastructure is dependent on the provision of adequate funding for this purpose. The funding gap is growing, with about 100 areas under some form of development constraints.

An investment of £1.45bn is needed in Belfast alone over the next 12 – 13 years. An estimated additional £1.7bn capital funding is needed during the next price control period (PC21) running from 2021 – 27 for NI Water's other requirements. This compares with a 6 year budget of £990m in the current Price Control period, PC15, which my Department is underfunding by about £60m due to the capital constraints in the Department.

As Minister I have inherited a range of capital pressures and, although I am determined to prioritise investment in water and wastewater infrastructure, I am also conscious of the need to address regional imbalance, improve connectivity and address climate change within current budget restrictions.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the designation of the North Channel Special Area of Conservation, whether it is her Department's responsibility to review planning permission for gas storage caverns at Islandmagee in accordance with Regulations 49 and 50 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995, as amended in 2015. **(AQW 742/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: While the original permission was granted in 2012 by the then Department of the Environment, following the transfer of planning powers to district councils, under the provisions of the Planning Act (NI) 2011, that decision is treated as having been made by the relevant council which is Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. Therefore, any review falling to the planning system would be the responsibility of that council.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will introduce an MOT exemption for Vehicles of Historical Interest, similar to what has been introduced in Great Britain. **(AQW 757/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: I am aware that this exemption was introduced in Great Britain in 2018 which has led to a disparity as to how Vehicles of Historic Interest are treated in GB and NI.

I am also aware that following lobbying from both elected representatives and members of the public that my Department ran a public consultation exercise in 2019 seeking views as to whether this exemption should be introduced here.

This is an issue that I wish to examine carefully, and I will consider the consultation responses before I decide how best to proceed.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure why the planned speed reduction on the Derrymacash Road, Craigavon, which was due to be in place by Autumn 2019, has not yet been implemented. **(AQW 770/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: I have been advised that formal notice of my Department's proposal to introduce a 30mph speed limit on the Derrymacash Road was published in the Irish News, News Letter and Belfast Telegraph on the 8th January 2020. The period for objections to the proposal ends on the 31st January 2020.

The next stage following consultation will depend to a large extent on the level of support for the proposal and the nature of any objections received. I recognise the importance of this measure from a road safety perspective and am keen to see the Order prepared quickly and brought before the Assembly under the normal procedure. Once that process has been completed, and provided there is also support within the Assembly, the Department will be in a position to put in place the speed reduction and erect new 30mph speed limit signs.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what his Department is doing to prevent flooding in Newtownstewart. **(AQW 780/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: Following the extreme flood event that affected large areas of the Northwest in August 2017, my Department carried out a flood study to assess the flood risk to Newtownstewart from the River Strule. The aim of this study was to assess the level of flood risk to properties in the town and to identify if there were any economically viable engineering solutions to alleviate this risk. Unfortunately, this study has shown that a flood alleviation scheme at this location would not be cost beneficial.

I recognise that this will be a disappointment to the owners of properties that are known to be at risk from flooding, but I can confirm that my Department will continue to carry out watercourse maintenance and regular grille inspections in the area, to ensure that there is no increased risk of flooding. I would also encourage homeowners that are at risk of flooding to consider applying for the Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme run by my Department. Successful applicants to the Grant Scheme can receive 90% of the costs (up to £10,000) to modify their properties to make them more resistant to flooding. To date, three of the seven residential properties in Newtownstewart that are estimated to be at risk of flooding from the River Strule, have applied for the Grant Scheme and been approved.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's plans to repair Glenrandel Bridge near Park village following flooding in August 2017.

(AQW 790/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Glenrandal Bridge, which was almost totally washed away in flooding in August 2017, is a listed structure located within an Area of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Area of Conservation. It is also in an area susceptible to flooding. It was one of five bridges damaged beyond repair during the flooding incident of August 2017.

Approval of a design for the construction of a replacement bridge has taken longer than normal, due to the requirement of additional statutory processes, such as Listed Building Consent and a Habitats Regulations Assessment. A design satisfying the requirements of the various agencies involved has been finalised and the scheme is currently going through the tender process.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the review of the Taxis Act 2008, as commenced in 2016.

(AQW 801/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the important role that the taxi industry plays, both to transport networks and also to commuters by providing a valuable service every day to people and businesses in our cities, towns and rural communities. I refer the Member to my response to AQW327/17-22.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure following the recent routine MOT fault checks, to outline (i) the number of MOT Test centres that have been affected; (ii) the number of appointments that have been postponed; (iii) the number of defects detected; and (iv) how long the affected centres will be closed.

(AQW 820/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following in-depth maintenance inspections, faults were identified in some scissor lifts. All 15 MOT centres have been effected. This situation has led to around 21,500 tests being cancelled across the network of 15 test centres from Tuesday 21 to Monday 3 February. During this period, DVA has continued to conduct over 24,500 vehicle tests. Defects have been detected in 52 lifts.

The current situation is not acceptable and I have instructed the DVA to work urgently to get a safe, sustainable and trusted service up and running as soon as and as safely as possible. Testing on heavy goods vehicles and buses is continuing and the heavy duty lanes are also being used to prioritise taxis and four year old car customers, for private customers and dealerships. All other customers except taxis and those with four year old cars will be automatically issued an MOT exemption certificate which they can use to tax their vehicle and thereby continue to drive. I have also instructed officials to ensure extended opening hours are in place in order to minimise disruption to customers.

Two new lifts have been installed to provide additional capacity, one in Belfast and one in Derry. These lifts were pre-ordered at the end of 2019 as part of a programme to increase capacity within the testing network. Their deployment has now been accelerated due to the current disruption. Three existing lifts have also been independently inspected and cleared to go back into use.

I have also instructed my Permanent Secretary to commission two separate reviews, which I will oversee. The first is an investigation of the timeline and events that led up to the situation that has arisen. I need greater assurance than I have at present about the maintenance and testing regime in operation and about the way in which initial concerns about the lifting equipment were followed up and addressed. I want to know the precise timeline and to understand who knew what and when and all actions taken. This review will be carried out independently by professional auditors managed from outside the Department.

I have also commissioned a second review which will be carried out by an external expert who will provide me with independent advice on the steps that need to be taken to return our MOT centres urgently to a position where a full testing service can be provided. I am determined that all options will be explored to minimise the disruption to customers but the safety of staff and customers will continue to be my top priority.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans to introduce an MOT exemption for Vehicles of Historical Interest, similar to what has been introduced in Great Britain.

(AQW 897/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that this exemption was introduced in Great Britain in 2018 which has led to a disparity as to how Vehicles of Historic Interest are treated in GB and NI.

I am also aware that following lobbying from both elected representatives and members of the public that my Department ran a public consultation exercise in 2019 seeking views as to whether this exemption should be introduced here.

This is an issue that I wish to examine carefully, and I will consider the consultation responses before I decide how best to proceed.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the timeframe for completion of the A1 Junctions Phase 2 scheme.

(AQW 903/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very aware how important the A1 Junctions Phase 2 road improvements are for the many people who have expressed their support for the scheme, especially those who have lost loved ones and I want to move to the next stage as quickly as possible after the completion of the statutory processes.

I am committed to working to find solutions that deliver better for our communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland. I will be assessing the pressures across my department reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure following the discovery of faults to vehicle lifts., what cost will be incurred to repair testing equipment at Lisburn vehicle test centre.

(AQW 916/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current situation is not acceptable and I have instructed the DVA to work urgently to get a safe, sustainable and trusted service up and running as soon as and as safely as possible. Testing on heavy goods vehicles and buses is continuing and the heavy duty lanes are being used to prioritise taxis and 4 year old car customers. All other customers except taxis and those with four year old cars will be automatically issued an MOT exemption certificate which they can use to tax their vehicle and thereby continue to drive. I have also instructed officials to ensure extended opening hours are in place in order to minimise disruption to customers. I have commissioned a review which will be carried out by an external expert who will provide me with independent advice on the steps that need to be taken to return our MOT centres urgently to a position where a full testing service can be provided. I am determined that all options will be looked at in order to minimise the disruption to customers but the safety of staff and customers will continue to be my top priority. At this stage it is not known if the lifts in Lisburn will be repaired and hence any costs that may be involved.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the timetable for the introduction of a Glider route in North Belfast.

(AQW 968/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A north-south Glider route is one of the projects identified for inclusion in the Belfast Region City Deal. The next stages will require close working across all departments and with the other Belfast Region City Deal partners, including to reach agreement on funding and on which projects are most capable of delivering the City Deal objectives. To that end, my officials are working closely with the councils and other partners to take forward a feasibility and options appraisal which will help in identifying route options. This work should be completed by the end of this year.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the extension of a Glider route to Cairnshill and Carryduff.

(AQW 1025/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A south-north Glider route is one of the projects identified for inclusion in the Belfast Region City Deal. The next stages will require close working across all departments and with the other Belfast Region City Deal partners, including to reach agreement on funding and on which projects are most capable of delivering the City Deal objectives. To that end, my officials are working closely with the councils and other partners to take forward a feasibility and options appraisal which will help in identifying route options. This work should be completed by the end of this year.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has plans to raise the railings on (i) Arthur Bridge; (ii) Hightown Bridge; and (iii) Clifton Street Bridge, North Belfast, following recent suicide attempts.

(AQW 1038/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Mental health and well-being are extremely important to me, both personally and as Minister, and to my Department. I will be working closely with Executive colleagues, local communities, experts, stakeholders and frontline staff to ensure that my Department contributes fully to this agenda.

My Department is currently working in partnership with stakeholders to consider positive actions that we can take to reduce the number of suicide attempts associated with our transport network, and bridges in particular. Where appropriate, and where supported by expert opinion, this may include changes to bridge infrastructure. There are currently no plans to raise the railings on the 3 bridges you have mentioned, however I will now be looking at all options to explore what is needed and possible to help with suicide prevention.

Whilst I recognise that engineering solutions may provide part of the answer, in isolation they may not address the underlying problem and according to experts may have the potential to reinforce the association of bridges with suicide attempts and further stigmatise the area without necessarily reducing the number of attempts.

I believe a more innovative and collaborative approach is required and I plan to actively engage with experts and stakeholders in the coming weeks.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of recent MOT cancellations, what steps she is taking to ensure that businesses who use PSV vehicles are able to comply with the law and continue to operate.

(AQW 1057/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current situation is not acceptable and I have instructed the DVA to work urgently to get a safe, sustainable and trusted service up and running as soon as and as safely as possible. Testing on heavy goods vehicles and buses is continuing, heavy duty lanes are also being used and MOT opening hours are being extended to prioritise taxis and four year old car customers, for private customers and dealerships. All other customers except taxis and those with four year old cars will be automatically issued an MOT exemption certificate which they can use to tax their vehicle and thereby continue to drive. I have also instructed officials to ensure extended opening hours are in place in order to minimise disruption to customers.

Two new lifts have been installed to provide additional capacity, one in Belfast and one in Derry. These lifts were pre-ordered at the end of 2019 as part of a programme to increase capacity within the testing network. Their deployment has now been accelerated due to the current disruption. Three existing lifts have also been inspected and cleared for use. These lifts are being used to prioritise taxis and four year old car customers for private customers and dealerships.

I have also instructed my Permanent Secretary to commission two separate reviews, which I will oversee. The first is an investigation of the timeline and events that led up to the situation that has arisen. I need greater assurance than I have at present about the maintenance and testing regime in operation and about the way in which initial concerns about the lifting equipment were followed up and addressed. I want to know the precise timeline and to understand who knew what and when and all actions taken. This review is being carried out independently by professional auditors managed from outside the Department.

I have also commissioned a second review which is being carried out by an external expert who will provide me with independent advice on the steps that need to be taken to return our MOT centres urgently to a position where a full testing service can be provided. I am determined that all options will be explored to minimise the disruption to customers but the safety of staff and customers will continue to be my top priority.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the Newtownards MOT centre will fully reopen.

(AQW 1068/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current situation is not acceptable and I have instructed the DVA to work urgently to get a safe, sustainable and trusted service up and running as soon as and as safely as possible. Testing on heavy goods vehicles and buses is continuing and the heavy duty lanes are also being used to prioritise taxis and four year old car customers, for private customers and dealerships. All other customers except taxis and those with four year old cars will be automatically issued an MOT exemption certificate which they can use to tax their vehicle and thereby continue to drive. I have also instructed officials to ensure extended opening hours are in place in order to minimise disruption to customers.

Two new lifts have been installed to provide additional capacity, one in Belfast and one in Derry. These lifts were pre-ordered at the end of 2019 as part of a programme to increase capacity within the testing network. Their deployment has now been accelerated due to the current disruption. These lifts will be independently assessed and checked before becoming operational. More information will follow on when and how these two new lifts will be operational.

I have also instructed my Permanent Secretary to commission two separate reviews, which I will oversee. The first is an investigation of the timeline and events that led up to the situation that arose last night. I need greater assurance than I have at present about the maintenance and testing regime in operation and about the way in which initial concerns about the lifting equipment were followed up and addressed. I want to know the precise timeline and to understand who knew what and when and all actions taken. This review will be carried out independently by professional auditors managed from outside the Department.

I have also commissioned a second review which will be carried out by an external expert who will provide me with independent advice on the steps that need to be taken to return our MOT centres urgently to a position where a full testing service can be provided. I am determined that all options will be explored to minimise the disruption to customers and see the return of safe and fully operable MOT Centres across Northern Ireland as quickly as possible but the safety of staff and customers will continue to be my top priority

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given new figures around air pollution-related deaths, what measures her Department will take to address air pollution expected to be produced by the new York Street Interchange.

(AQW 1073/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department continues to identify, plan and implement measures to promote and enable a shift onto more sustainable modes of transport to reduce emissions and improve air quality. This includes supporting the Council to help them deliver on their Air Quality Action Plans for Belfast.

Specifically, in relation to the York Street Interchange Scheme the air quality impact of the scheme was discussed in detail at the Public Inquiry. The Environmental Assessment concluded that the modifications to the road layout and associated traffic redistribution effect would have a negligible impact on the air quality in that area.

My Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs who are leading on the development of a long term clean air strategy for Northern Ireland, creating opportunities to identify and implement further measures to improve quality whilst simultaneously cutting carbon emissions.

Miss Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will expedite the process for awarding compensation for damage caused to cars by potholes and other road defects.

(AQW 1133/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Although my Department has a statutory duty under Article 8 of the Roads Order 1993 to maintain public roads, there is no automatic entitlement to compensation. I appreciate that this can be frustrating for people who have incurred damage to their vehicles due to potholes and other road defects. However, before any compensation can be awarded an investigation needs to be undertaken to establish whether my Department has met its legal duty.

I have instructed my officials to continue to focus on confirming liability decisions as quickly as possible. However, every case has to be dealt with on its own merits and investigated accordingly.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of parking charge notices issued in error; and (ii) the number of incorrect bills issued, as a result of problems with the JustPark app.

(AQW 1136/17-22)

Ms Mallon: JustPark has processed over 85,000 successful transactions through its app since going live. Of the customers who experienced problems with the app, 23 were issued with a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN) in error and all of those PCNs have been cancelled by my Department. A further 286 parking sessions, covering 261 customers, resulted in 169 cases being invoiced incorrectly however JustPark has assured us that all customers' accounts have been credited. JustPark has also apologised to affected customers and publicly for its mistakes. While I understand that initial teething problems can and do occur when new contracts take effect, my senior officials have made clear to the company that the Department will not tolerate any further errors and I have also asked for a full and urgent report from the company.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the Ballymena MOT centre will fully reopen.

(AQW 1188/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current situation is not acceptable and I have instructed the DVA to work urgently to get a safe, sustainable and trusted service up and running as soon as and as safely as possible. Testing on heavy goods vehicles and buses is continuing and the heavy duty lanes are also being used to prioritise taxis and four year old car customers, for private customers and dealerships. All other customers except taxis and those with four year old cars will be automatically issued an MOT exemption certificate which they can use to tax their vehicle and thereby continue to drive. I have also instructed officials to ensure extended opening hours are in place in order to minimise disruption to customers.

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I have also commissioned a second review which will be carried out by an external expert who will provide me with independent advice on the steps that need to be taken to return our MOT centres urgently to a position where a full testing service can be provided. I am determined that all options will be explored to minimise the disruption to customers but the safety of staff and customers will continue to be my top priority.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether consideration has been given to exploring the use of Ireland's National Car Testing Service in border areas to carry out MOTs for cars and light vehicles.

(AQW 1196/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In line with Directive 2014/45, a vehicle can only be tested in another Member State for the purposes of re-registering that vehicle in that Member State.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to (i) include a regular bus service to Antrim Area Hospital from Cookstown and Magherafelt; and (ii) make any alternations to the 212 Service to include stopping at Antrim Area Hospital.

(AQW 1287/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink is currently developing a proposal for the provision of direct bus service between Cookstown and Antrim hospital. Subject to discussion with the Mid Ulster Council, a Monday–Friday service could be introduced in April 2020.

Whilst the current works on the A6 will reduce the journey times, this saving has the potential to make the 212 express service more attractive for commuters travelling on the Belfast to Derry route. Given the time it would take to exit and re-join the motorway, a stop to this service at the hospital could have a negative impact on increasing its overall attractiveness to commuters. This is being analysed. As an alternative for those travelling from the North West, Translink currently advise passengers to use the train service alighting at Antrim Station and taking the local 321E connection which serves the Hospital.

Department of Justice

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to outline the timeframe for the implementation of the recommendations arising from Sir John Gillen's report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 481/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Implementation of the Gillen Review into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences is included in New Decade, New Approach and is a key priority for my Department.

The Department has been working with partners to finalise an impactful and phased implementation plan for the current mandate and beyond, which focuses efforts around what has the greatest impact on complainants going through the system, including children.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether it is her understanding that former RUC officers, and those who served in the RUC and are now serving in the PSNI, will be eligible to join the Historical Investigations Unit if it is established.

(AQW 482/17-22)

Mrs Long: The New Decade, New Approach Deal records the United Kingdom Government accepting responsibility to introduce Westminster legislation on the legacy institutions encompassed within the Stormont House Agreement.

Earlier draft legislation on the creation of the Historical Investigations Unit published by the Northern Ireland Office made clear that the recruitment of investigators for the HIU will be the responsibility of its independent Director. The draft legislation proposed the Director will have a duty to ensure that any member of staff selected to undertake a particular investigation is able to do so in an Article 2 compliant manner, with no conflict of interest which could affect the outcome. Candidates for appointment should be selected on the basis of merit, in line with normal recruitment practices and equality legislation. I would not expect there to be a general restriction regarding the previous employment history of potential candidates.

The draft legislation provided for the HIU to employ one or more external teams, with no previous links to Northern Ireland, to conduct investigations where investigator independence could be perceived as an issue. Schedule 2 of the draft bill included provision for secondment to the HIU of police officers from the PSNI. The United Kingdom Government has committed to commencing an "intensive process" with the Northern Ireland parties in respect of the proposed legislation to be introduced this year.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Justice to outline (i) what timescale they have for the implementation of a strategy to tackle all forms of paramilitarism and gangsterism; and (ii) how they will ensure victims of intimidation remain in their homes while the perpetrators are dealt with by the PSNI.

(AQW 503/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Executive is currently implementing its Action Plan to Tackle Paramilitary Activity, Criminality, and Organised Crime. The Action Plan runs from 2016 to 2021 and includes commitments that are being delivered by government departments, statutory agencies and a wide range of delivery partners, including in the voluntary and community sector. The Action Plan has an associated funding allocation of £50m, which is jointly provided by HM Treasury and NI Executive funds.

Many of the issues involved are long-term and complex in nature, and will take time to address in full. In the near future, the Executive will be considering how to refresh the Action Plan in light of the learning generated through implementing the existing commitments.

My officials are also preparing a consultation on a draft Organised Crime Strategy for Northern Ireland with the overarching aim to protect individuals, communities and businesses from organised crime. The strategy will complement work under the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme.

Decisions regarding the relocation of victims of intimidation are an operational matter for the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. You may therefore wish to direct your question directly to those organisations.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether she will make representations to the Lord Chief Justice to ensure judges make full use of the sentences available to them, with regard to animal cruelty offences.

(AQW 523/17-22)

Mrs Long: The legal framework governing animal cruelty offences was strengthened by legislation brought forward in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 which increased the maximum penalties available for these offences.

Sentencing within this framework is entirely a matter for the independent judiciary taking into account all relevant factors in the individual case. In making these decisions the judiciary are guided by sentencing guidelines and guideline judgments from the Court of Appeal.

The Director of Public Prosecutions has the power to refer animal cruelty cases to the Court of Appeal if he deems that the sentence handed down in certain Crown Court cases is unduly lenient.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice in the face of the climate change emergency, to outline what actions or policies his Department will (i) take; or (ii) adopt, (a) immediately; (b) in the short term; and (c) in the longer term to help reduce carbon emissions.

(AQW 548/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department has initiatives, past, present and future that are aimed at promoting sustainable development and reducing carbon emissions. This is a substantial list but some of the main areas are:

(i) **Past Actions (with ongoing benefits)**

Energy

- Introduction of LED and PIR sensor lighting within Prison Service, Youth Justice Agency, Probation Board and Forensic Science.
- Introduction of Building Energy Management Systems with PSNI, Prisons and NI Courts.
- Use of solar panels within Forensic Science.
- Introduction of software to shut down PCs after hours within the Core Department.
- Boiler replacement from oil to gas/solar/biomass within the Core Department and Prison Service.

Waste

- Introduction of 100% on line application for AccessNI within Core Department.
- Move to digital AccessNI certificates now at 50% digital within Core Department.
- Improvement in recycling and waste disposal systems in Prisons, Probation Board and Youth Justice Agency.

Water

- Introduction of intelligent metering for gas, water and electricity within PSNI
- Employment of water conservation methods such as rainwater harvesting and leak detection methods within PSNI.

(ii) **Present Actions**

Energy

- Improvements to building fabric and window replacement scheme with Prison Service.
- Fuel conversion schemes at Courthouses.
- Redesign of offices to support space sharing and decrease energy costs within Core Department.
- Remote servicing/testing of alarm equipment within Probation Board.
- Applying Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) to major new build projects in Prison Service and PSNI.
- Use building refurbishment and re-purposing projects as opportunities to cost-effectively incorporate energy saving measures/features within PSNI.

Waste

- Sustainable procurement – incentivise the supply chain to promote reduction in packaging and increase in recycling within Prison Service

Corporate and Social Responsibility

- Promotion of sustainability awareness across the Department.

(ii) **Future Actions****Transport/Travel**

- Consideration of installing charging points in the public and staff car parks to facilitate electric vehicles and replacing the current vehicle with an electric vehicle in Youth Justice Agency.
- Remote working – reducing travel and office space demand within the Probation Board.

Energy

- Continuation of Programme of BREEAM Certification for new-builds within Prison Service.
- Plantroom upgrade programme within Prison Service.
- Feasibility study to appraise the benefits of introducing electricity 'load sharing' for export to National Grid within Prison Service.
- Programme of ventilation upgrades to reduce energy consumption within NI Courts.
- Feasibility study to establish benefits of solar panel on south-facing roofs within Youth Justice Agency.

Water

- Direct Hot Water decentralisation – to reduce standing losses and allow heating plant to be disengaged during summer months within Prison Service.

Corporate and Social Responsibility

- Continuous review and promotion of sustainable development initiatives by Asset Management Board (AMB) within the Core Department and wider Civil Service initiatives.
- Continued effort to reduce the environmental impact of the DoJ estate through the Asset Management Board (AMB) in the Core Department.
- Consideration of introduction of Environmental Management Systems Certification under ISO14001 within the Core Department.
- Consideration of developing conservation areas and improved biodiversity within PSNI, Forensic Science and Prison Service land.
- Development of procurement policy which considers life-cycle cost of products (cost of future disposal and residual value) within PSNI.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Justice whether she will undertake to review the continued use of courthouses by the Appeal Service for appeals and hearings, in regards to benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance and Personal Independence Payment, with particular reference to the stress attending a court building environment causes many claimants suffering from ill health and mental health issues.

(AQW 585/17-22)

Mrs Long: Court houses are associated with the administration of a diverse range of civil and family justice proceedings, and as such provide an independent environment with appropriate facilities for a range of business not associated with criminal justice. However, I recognise that the use of court houses for benefit appeal hearings is a source of debate due to the reasons given in the question. The use of court houses has reduced delay to appellants and has reduced costs associated with rental of suitable venues to the Department for Communities, as well as offering better access to private waiting space and consultation rooms than many alternative venues. Ultimately, statutory responsibility for the Appeals Service (TAS) lies with Department for Communities and the listing of benefit appeals is a matter for that Department. I will work closely with the Minister for Communities to review the suitability of court accommodation for appellants who are attending benefit appeal hearings.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Justice to detail any planned increase in the number of police officers on Neighbourhood Teams in the Newry, Mourne and Down Council area, broken down by District Electoral Area.

(AQW 608/17-22)

Mrs Long: Decisions relating to the allocation of police officers in the PSNI are an operational 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 Policing Board. You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to cases currently in the court system in which human trafficking is an element, to detail the accompanying charges, broken down by (i) court level; and (ii) division.

(AQW 628/17-22)

Mrs Long: There are eight cases currently in the court system in which human trafficking is an element. The charges in respect of the cases, broken down by court level and division are set out in the table below.

Cases currently live (as of 6 January 2020) with at least one offence under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act 2015

Court Division	Court Tier	Charge Title	Number of Charges	Number of Cases
Belfast	Crown Court	Threats to Kill	1	2
		Threats to Damage Property	1	
		Human Trafficking	4	
		Control Prostitution for gain	1	
		Conceal Criminal Property	4	
		Possessing Criminal Property	2	
		Common Assault (Indictable)	4	
		Sexual Assault	1	
		Possess Offensive Weapon with Intent to commit an Indictable Offence	1	
		Acquiring Criminal Property	1	
Belfast	Magistrates Court	Require Person to Perform forced labour	2	2
Antrim	Magistrates Court	Commit an act outraging Public Decency	1	1
		Attempting to pay for sexual services of a child	1	
		Attempt to pay sexual services from person	1	
		Commit an act outraging Public Decency	1	
Craigavon	Magistrates Court	Control Prostitution for gain	3	2
		Arrange/Facilitate the travel of another	3	
		Acquiring Criminal Property	1	
		Paying for sexual services of a person	1	
		Brothel Keeping	1	
		Cause/Incite Child 13-16 Sexual Activity	1	
		Attempt to pay sexual services from person	1	
Fermanagh & Tyrone	Magistrates Court	Breach of Sexual Offences Prevention Order	2	1
		Paying for Sexual services of a person	1	
		Attempt to pay sexual services from person	2	
		Attempted Breach of a Sexual Offences Prevention Order	1	

Note: Court tier includes the tier that the case was at on 6 January 2020. Active charges in the Magistrates Court may or may not be committed to the Crown Court going forward.

Paying for sexual services from a person – this charge falls under the Sexual Offences (NI) Order 2008, however the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act made an amendment to include a new offence of 'paying for sexual services' under the 2008 order.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice what plans her Department has to tackle the cross-border smuggling of (i) cigarettes; and (ii) fuel.

(AQW 630/17-22)

Mrs Long: The operational element of tackling cross-border smuggling of cigarettes and fuel falls largely to operational law enforcement partners. However I am committed to ensuring that the strong co-operation that exists between agencies operating in Northern Ireland and their cross-border counterparts continues to be supported by my Department.

As Justice Minister, I chair the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF), a multi-agency partnership that has been established to provide strategic leadership in tackling organised crime in Northern Ireland. The OCTF has recently established a dedicated subgroup focused exclusively on smuggling to respond at a strategic level to all types of cross-border smuggling including cigarette and cross border fuel smuggling and to identify and address emerging threats. There is multi-agency and cross-border representation on this group.

The Joint Agency Task Force, established under the Fresh Start Agreement, also brings together expertise from across law enforcement agencies, including PSNI, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, National Crime Agency and Border Force and their counterparts in Ireland. This is an excellent example of operational collaboration to tackle illegal activity.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice what plans she has to identify land, owned by your Department, that is suitable for the planting of trees, given that Northern Ireland is the second most deforested part of Europe.
(AQW 661/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department is represented on the Cross Departmental Working Group on Climate Change (chaired by Permanent Secretary in Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs). At the invitation of the chair of that group, the Department of Justice has reviewed the potential for increased tree planting on land owned by it. That review confirmed the potential for tree planting on Department of Justice land is very limited. However the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) participated in the Government-wide Future Generations Workshop held on 20th September 2019. As part of that Workshop it confirmed that it could make land available at each of its establishments for the planting of trees. I plan to take this forward along with a number of other related initiatives as part of our sustainability and reduction of carbon footprint agenda.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice how many individuals have received (i) a positive reasonable grounds decision; (ii) a negative reasonable grounds decision; (iii) a positive conclusive grounds decision; (iv) a negative conclusive grounds decision under the National Referral Mechanism, in each of the last five years, broken down by (a) age of victim; (b) nationality; and (c) type of exploitation involved.
(AQW 713/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Single Competent Authority (SCA) was established in 2019 as part of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) Reform Programme and assumed responsibility for all NRM referrals from 29 April 2019. It replaced the two former competent authorities in the National Crime Agency (NCA) Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Unit and in UK Visas and Immigration.

The SCA is responsible for publishing NRM statistics, which are produced in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics. Statistics are published online at the link: – <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-referral-mechanism-statistics>.

Prior to the transfer of NRM decision-making responsibilities to the SCA, statistics were published by the NCA. Previous publications can be accessed on the NCA website: –

<https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications?search=&category%5B%5D=3&limit=15&tag=&tag=>

A summary of the current status of all cases is included within the NRM's End of Year Summary Report. This summary details the number of positive conclusive decisions; negative decisions (whether at reasonable grounds or conclusive grounds stages); pending decisions; cases suspended; withdrawn referrals; and other non-decision cases. Page 5 of the End of Year Summary 2018 report has the most up-to-date published figures covering the years 2013 to 2018 and may be accessed at: –

<https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/282-national-referral-mechanism-statistics-end-of-year-summary-2018/file>.

The breakdown of statistics on the current status of cases relates to figures for the whole of the UK and are not provided by jurisdiction. Decision data specific to Northern Ireland cases is not published.

The SCA has provided the data in the tables below in respect of the total number of Northern Ireland referrals to the NRM from 2015 to 2019 (up to September 2019), broken down by type of exploitation and nationality and further classified by the number of adult and minor referrals. The SCA is not yet in a position to provide a breakdown of referrals for 2019 according to nationality.

Northern Ireland NRM referrals for calendar years 2015 to 2019

2015

	Adult	Minor	Total
Referrals	40	13	53
Claimed Exploitation Type			
Domestic Servitude	2	1	3
Labour Exploitation	28	3	31
Sexual Exploitation	6	6	12
Unknown Exploitation	4	3	7
Claimed Nationality			
Bulgaria	16	1	17
China	4	2	6

	Adult	Minor	Total
Hungary	5	0	5
UK	0	5	5
Albania	2	1	3
Lithuania	3	0	3
Romania	1	1	2
Somalia	2	0	2
Uganda	2	0	2
Vietnam	1	1	2
Ethiopia	1	0	1
Iran	1	0	1
Nigeria	1	0	1
Pakistan	1	0	1
Poland	0	1	1
Syria	0	1	1
Total	40	13	53

2016

	Adult	Minor	Total
Referrals	27	6	33
Claimed Exploitation Type			
Domestic Servitude	3	0	3
Labour Exploitation	13	1	14
Sexual Exploitation	10	0	10
Unknown Exploitation	1	5	6
Claimed Nationality			
Romania	9	1	10
China	5	0	5
Lithuania	3	0	3
Albania	1	1	2
Iran	0	2	2
Bulgaria	1	0	1
DRC	0	1	1
Malaysia	1	0	1
Mongolia	1	0	1
Nigeria	1	0	1
Sierra Leone	1	0	1
Somalia	1	0	1
Taiwan	1	0	1
Vietnam	1	0	1
Zambia	0	1	1
Zimbabwe	1	0	1
Total	27	6	33

2017

	Adult	Minor	Total
Referrals	21	10	31
Claimed Exploitation Type			
Domestic Servitude	1	1	2
Labour Exploitation	10	4	14
Sexual Exploitation	8	2	10
Unknown Exploitation	2	3	5
Claimed Nationality			
Afghanistan	0	2	2
Albania	2	0	2
China	4	0	4
Czech Republic	1	0	1
Hungary	1	0	1
Lithuania	2	2	4
Nigeria	1	1	2
Romania	6	0	6
Somalia	0	2	2
Sudan	0	1	1
UK	0	1	1
Vietnam	2	1	3
Zimbabwe	2	0	2
Total	21	10	31

2018

	Adult	Minor	Total
Referrals	35	17	52
Claimed Exploitation Type			
Domestic Servitude	2	1	3
Labour Exploitation	17	4	21
Sexual Exploitation	14	6	20
Unknown Exploitation	2	6	8
Claimed Nationality			
China	7	0	7
Romania	7	0	7
UK	2	5	7
Somalia	2	4	6
Albania	3	2	5
Ghana	3	0	3
Portugal	2	1	3
Sudan	2	0	2
Afghanistan	0	1	1
Eritrea	1	0	1

	Adult	Minor	Total
Ethiopia	1	0	1
Kuwait	0	1	1
Lithuania	1	0	1
Malawi	1	0	1
Nigeria	1	0	1
South Africa	0	1	1
Timor-Leste	0	1	1
Total	35	17	52

2019 – Quarters 1, 2 and 3 (January – September)

	Adult	Minor	Total
Referrals	45	9	54
Claimed Exploitation Type			
Domestic Servitude	5	0	5
Labour Exploitation	22	3	25
Sexual Exploitation	17	1	18
Unknown Exploitation	1	5	6

Nationality breakdown is not yet available for Quarters 2 and 3.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice when her Department anticipates new guidance on human trafficking will be released by the Public Prosecution Service, since the guidance has not been updated since the passage of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act 2015.

(AQW 715/17-22)

Mrs Long: Updated guidance on human trafficking is a matter for the Director of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), who is, of course, independent of my Department.

However, in response to your question, PPS has provided me with the following information.

The PPS issued two detailed internal instructions to all legal staff in 2015 to update both on the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and subsequently on the approach to be taken in cases involving a statutory defence raised under section 22 of that Act. Formal updating of the published guidance is part of a Policy Work Programme and whilst it is not possible at this stage to provide a date for completion, because of a range of ongoing competing demands, the PPS is confident that, given the expertise available and the guidance that has issued since the 2015 Act came into effect, they are dealing effectively with these cases.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many slavery and trafficking reparation orders have been made under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (NI) 2015; and (ii) the level of fine or compensation granted in each case.

(AQW 716/17-22)

Mrs Long: There have been no reparation orders made under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (NI) 2015.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice how many victims of trafficking have been provided with support for an extended period of time under section 18(9) of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims Act (NI) 2015.

(AQW 717/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department has supported 34 individuals for a period of time beyond their positive conclusive grounds decision under section 18(9) since the introduction of Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 on 13 January 2015.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice how many (i) prosecutions; and (ii) convictions have been made in Northern Ireland under Article 214 of the Human Medicines Regulations 2014.

(AQW 755/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is outlined in the table below. The most recent year for which finalised information is available is 2018.

Prosecutions and Convictions at courts for offences under Article 214 of the Human Medicines Regulations 2012, 2014-2018

Year	Prosecutions	Convictions
2014	0	0
2015	*	*
2016	*	*
2017	0	0
2018	3	3

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to initial disposals at court. Appeals are not included.
 - 2 Figures relate to cases where there was a prosecution or conviction for at least one offence under the legislation specified.
 - 3 Figures relate to cases prosecuted by PPS on behalf of PSNI or other bodies.
 - 4 Figures relating to prosecutions and convictions at courts in 2019 will be available by early summer 2020.
- * means a figure of less than 3 has been treated under rules of disclosure.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether she will (i) implement the recommendations from the Civil and Family Justice Review; and (ii) appoint an independent chairperson to the Family Justice Board.

(AQW 771/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Reports of the Review on Civil and Family Justice made a significant number of wide ranging recommendations. Many fall outside the remit of the Department of Justice or would have significant financial, operational or cross-cutting implications. Before reaching decisions I will need to take time to consider proposals in detail and discuss implications with other Departments. That includes recommendations in relation to the Family Justice Board.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of cases within the family justice system, in which one party is a litigant in person, broken down by (i) gender; (ii) applicant/respondent; and (iii) court level basis.

(AQW 772/17-22)

Mrs Long: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

However the University of Ulster report "Litigants in person in Northern Ireland: barriers to legal participation" contained data on the representation status of participants at the point of completion of cases. This data was extracted from the NICTS Management Information System under the remit of the research project and relates to completed cases during 2012-2017, broken down by business area, reflecting the gender of the issuing and responding parties in both represented and unrepresented cases.

The full report can be accessed at this link:

https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/309891/179367_NIHRC-Litigants-in-Person_BOOK___5_LOW.pdf

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice how many cases, at each court level, have been in the family justice system for more than five years.

(AQW 773/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Integrated Court Operation System (ICOS), contains data relating to court business across all court tiers. Information in the form requested is not readily extractable from ICOS and could only be obtained by the development of a bespoke IT report followed by an extensive manual exercise to quality assure the data.

The information could therefore only be provided at a disproportionate cost.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department has any plans to introduce (i) unexplained wealth orders; (ii) account freezing orders; (iii) the Criminal Finances Act, and to outline the timescale for any such introductions.

(AQW 800/17-22)

Mrs Long: One of my key priorities is the commencement in Northern Ireland of all outstanding provisions under the Criminal Finances Act 2017, including measures relating to Unexplained Wealth Orders and Account Freezing Orders. These powers will reinforce the ability of specified law enforcement agencies to recover the proceeds of crime and tackle money laundering.

Before these provisions can be commenced the Northern Ireland Assembly must first give its legislative consent to them. I have asked my officials to take forward the necessary steps to achieve this as soon as possible. My Department is working with the Home Office to prepare the commencement legislation as well additional secondary legislation and Codes of Practice that are required in order to give full effect to these powers. It is not possible to give an exact timescale at this stage; however, subject to the legislative consent of the Assembly, my intention is to ensure that these valuable measures are made available to the relevant law enforcement agencies within Northern Ireland before the end of this year.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice how many sex offenders, upon completion of their sentence, have been housed in each constituency during the period of 2017-2019.

(AQW 804/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice does not hold this information in the format requested.

As of 27th January 2020, the Probation Board in Northern Ireland was supervising 248 people subject to a licence/order in the community where the index offence was a sexual offence. Of the 248, 131 live in the Greater Belfast area and 117 live outside of Belfast.

Notification Requirements (Sexual Offences Act 2003) require individuals convicted of a relevant sexual offence to register their address with the PSNI. The number of registered sex offenders per PSNI Public Protection Branch districts (that are aligned with the Health and Social Care Trusts areas) is as follows:

Belfast	457
Northern	331
South Eastern	285
Southern	284
Western	232

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Justice how many (i) appeals have been lodged with the Planning Appeals Commission; and (ii) the number which remain undecided, in each of the last three years

(AQW 839/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Chief Commissioner has operational responsibility for the Planning Appeals Commission and as such will respond to this question. You can contact the Chief Commissioner at the address below:

Planning Appeals Commission, Park House, 87-91 Great Victoria Street, Belfast BT2 7AG.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether the review of the criminal injuries compensation scheme has been completed; and when the findings will be released.

(AQW 849/17-22)

Mrs Long: The initial Review of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme was completed in 2015, following a consultation exercise. Proposals to change the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme were agreed with the then Justice Minister, David Ford and subsequently with his successor, Claire Sugden. Officials were unable to progress this work further due to the collapse of the Assembly.

Since that time there have been a number of developments to include a Court of Appeal ruling on the same household sexual abuse provision contained in the NI Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme and an ongoing review by MOJ of the GB Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme. The Department is now revisiting the original proposals and are working closely with MoJ officials to develop revised proposals for amendments to the NI Scheme in line with those for GB.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice how many applications for firearm certificates were refused, including the reason for refusal, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 850/17-22)

Mrs Long: The refusal of applications for firearm certificates is decided by 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 Policing Board.

You may therefore wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice how many firearms certificates have been issued in the last 3 years, including (a) the type of firearm; and (b) the purpose for which they were issued.

(AQW 851/17-22)

Mrs Long: The issuing of firearm certificates is decided by 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 Policing Board.

You may therefore wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice on how many occasions has section 22 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act been (i) utilised; and (ii) successfully utilised by defendants in criminal cases.

(AQW 884/17-22)

Mrs Long: The prosecution of human trafficking cases is a matter for the Director of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) who is, of course independent of my Department. However, in response to your question, PPS has provided me with the following information.

The use of section 22 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act is a matter for defendants in criminal cases and is not held in a form which can be readily extracted from PPS records. Such information may be contained within individual case files or related electronic records, and to provide accurate data would require a manual search across a large range of cases which is not something that PPS is able to do. The defence is available in a number of different offences which further complicates efforts to collate figures.

The PPS has identified two cases in which Section 22 has been utilised or raised as a defence by the defendant. This defence was successful in one of the cases but the limitations of this information should be noted as there may be other cases which have not been captured above.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice how many Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders have been granted under the section 11 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act 2015.

(AQW 885/17-22)

Mrs Long: There have been two Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders granted under section 11 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) Act 2015.

Number of Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders granted by court tier: 2015 to 2019

Court Tier	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Magistrates Court	0	0	0	0	0
Crown Court	0	0	0	2	0

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the reform of the National Referral Mechanism.

(AQW 888/17-22)

Mrs Long: A number of National Referral Mechanism (NRM) reforms were announced by the UK government in 2017. My Department has been working with colleagues from the other UK jurisdictions to ensure that Northern Ireland is able to benefit from these reforms.

Measures to improve NRM decision making regarding the status of potential victims of modern slavery include: the establishment of a Single Competent Authority (SCA) in the Home Office to handle all NRM cases and to provide high quality, timely decisions for all victims regardless of their nationality. This has replaced the previous competent authorities in the National Crime Agency, and UK Visas and Immigration and is separate from the immigration system; the introduction in August 2019 of a new digital NRM referral system to replace the previous paper-based process and deliver a more streamlined and efficient system and to improve the quality of information being provided by first responders to the SCA; the establishment of Multi-Agency Assurance Panels to review all negative conclusive grounds decisions, thereby providing quality assurance and strengthening confidence in NRM outcomes.

My officials, with PSNI recently delivered multi-agency training on the new digital referral system to all first responder organisations in Northern Ireland. This included refresher training on the signs and indicators of modern slavery.

In relation to improving support for adult victims, my Department has enhanced standards of victim support through procurement of Northern Ireland's support contract. My officials will continue to explore what scope there is to enhance the existing support that is provided to victims and potential victims of modern slavery, subject to available resources.

Working with non-governmental and statutory partners my Department has delivered a number of measures aimed at improving identification of victims. These have included strategic communications to raise awareness of modern slavery as well as the development and implementation of a training plan, with particular emphasis on the Health and Social Care sector, so that front-line professionals are able to recognise and respond to signs and indicators of modern slavery so that victims can be identified and supported.

Responsibility for the protection and support of child victims of modern slavery falls primarily to the Department of Health.

Further detail on the NRM reforms and their implementation across the UK, including Northern Ireland, is provided in the UK Modern Slavery Annual Report 2019 at the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2019-uk-annual-report-on-modern-slavery>

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of convictions for participation in illegal dog fighting; and (ii) the sentence handed down in each case, in the last five years.

(AQW 891/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is not readily available. Prosecutions and convictions data held in Departmental datasets are on the basis of offence description and there is no specific offence for illegal dog fighting.

To identify cases which related to illegal dog fighting would require a manual search of case records for offences which involved animal cruelty or offences under the Dogs Order (Northern Ireland) 1983, of which there have been more than 50 dealt with at courts in each of the last five years. We estimate that to locate, retrieve and extract any information that might be relevant to your request would involve work of more than the appropriate limit.

The appropriate limit is specified in regulations and for central government is set at £700. There were approximately 300 potentially relevant cases over the period. It is estimated that to search systems manually for relevant information to identify whether offences for which a conviction was handed down related to illegal dog fighting, it will take one member of staff approximately ten minutes per case, giving a total of over 50 hours work. At a cost of £25 per hour, this equates to over £1,200 which is higher than the appropriate limit.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) how many instances of illegal hare coursing have been reported since the introduction of the ban in 2011; (ii) the number of convictions for breaching the ban; and (iii) the sentences handed down in each case.

(AQW 893/17-22)

Mrs Long: A ban on illegal hare coursing was introduced under the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Up to the end of 2018, the most recent year for which finalised information is available, there have been no convictions at courts for hare coursing offences under the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Departmental datasets do not contain information on the number of illegal hare coursing offences reported. That information may be available from the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice to outline (i) the advice her Department provides to places of worship that have been attacked; and (ii) the practical assistance provided to them.

(AQW 921/17-22)

Mrs Long: I recognise the effect that an attack on a place of worship can have in terms of the distress it causes to members of a faith community and the disruption that resulting damage can have.

The Department of Justice, along with the NI Policing Board, funds Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) to work with the community to identify issues of concern in a local area and to prepare plans to deliver practical solutions to address these. PCSPs also work in partnership with other organisations which contribute to community safety in their area. They can be contacted directly for advice and support.

The PSNI provide the services of Crime Prevention Officers (CPOs). On appointment, a CPO can provide information on crime prevention specific to each need. Further general crime prevention advice/guidance is available on NI Direct at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/crime-justice-and-law/crimes-and-crime-prevention>

Any premise that is attacked may apply to the Compensation Agency for compensation for loss suffered as a result of malicious or wanton damage to property. Under the Criminal Damage (Compensation) (NI) Order 1977, compensation is payable where it can be shown that the damage was caused:

- a) Unlawfully, maliciously or wantonly by three or more persons unlawfully, riotously or tumultuously assembled together; or
- b) As a result of an act committed maliciously by a person acting on behalf of, or in connection with, an unlawful association i.e. an act of terrorism.

Further details regarding the Criminal Damage Scheme can be obtained via the DoJ website: www.justice-ni.gov.uk/topics/justice-and-law/compensation-services

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice what action her Department has taken to address the issue of attacks on places of worship.

(AQW 922/17-22)

Mrs Long: I recognise the effect that an attack on a place of worship can have in terms of the distress it causes to members of a faith community and the disruption that resulting damage can have.

In relation to action taken to address the issue of attacks on places of worship, I can advise that any premise that is attacked may apply to Compensation Services for compensation for loss suffered as a result of malicious or wanton damage to property.

Further details regarding the Criminal Damage Scheme can be obtained via the DoJ website: www.justice-ni.gov.uk/topics/justice-and-law/compensation-services

In addition, the Department of Justice, along with the NI Policing Board, funds Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) to work with the community to identify issues of concern in a local area and to prepare plans to deliver practical solutions to address these. For example, the PCSP in Ards & North Down has delivered a NO HATE HERE promotional campaign and is currently funding drama workshops in four secondary schools in the area to explore the impact of hate crime.

My officials are currently exploring evidence based information in relation to attacks on places of worship, in liaison with the police, as well as criteria for the Places of Worship Security Fund that operates in England and Wales to assess if any similar scheme for Northern Ireland is required. I will consider this further once I have had the opportunity to reflect on the findings.

You may also wish to be aware that my Department is currently carrying out a review of anti-social behaviour legislation which would assist the effectiveness of legislation to manage nuisance and inconsiderate behaviours which may result in attacks on places of worship.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department plans to introduce a similar scheme to the Places of Worship Protective Security Funding Scheme operating in England and Wales.

(AQW 923/17-22)

Mrs Long: My officials are currently exploring evidence based information in relation to attacks on places of worship, in liaison with the police, as well as criteria for the Places of Worship Security Fund that operates in England and Wales to assess if any similar scheme for Northern Ireland is required. I will consider this further once I have had the opportunity to reflect on the findings.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice how many attacks on places of worship in North Down have resulted in prosecution in the last three years.

(AQW 999/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department does not hold the information requested. Prosecutions and convictions datasets hold information on the nature of the offence committed but do not hold information on associated circumstances, location or, as is pertinent in this case, detail on the type of building attacked.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice how many attacks on places of worship have resulted in prosecution in the last three years.

(AQW 1000/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department does not hold the information requested. Prosecutions and convictions datasets hold information on the nature of the offence committed but do not hold information on associated circumstances, location or, as is pertinent in this case, detail on the type of building attacked.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department has considered issuing guidance on dealing with attacks on places of worship.

(AQW 1066/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department has not issued specific guidance on dealing with attacks on places of worship. However, along with the NI Policing Board, my Department funds Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) to work with the community to identify issues of concern in a local area and to prepare plans to deliver practical solutions to address these. PCSPs also work in partnership with other organisations which contribute to community safety in an area. With a PCSP in each Council area, they can be contacted directly for advice and support.

The PSNI, who are members of PCSPs, also provide the services of Crime Prevention Officers (CPOs). On appointment, a CPO can provide information on crime prevention specific to each need. Further general crime prevention advice/guidance is available on NI Direct at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/crime-justice-and-law/crimes-and-crime-prevention>

Any premise that is attacked may apply to the Compensation Agency for compensation for loss suffered as a result of malicious or wanton damage to property. Under the Criminal Damage (Compensation) (NI) Order 1977, compensation is payable where it can be shown that the damage was caused:

- a) Unlawfully, maliciously or wantonly by three or more persons unlawfully, riotously or tumultuously assembled together; or
- b) As a result of an act committed maliciously by a person acting on behalf of, or in connection with, an unlawful association i.e. an act of terrorism.

Further details regarding the Criminal Damage Scheme can be obtained via the DoJ website: www.justice-ni.gov.uk/topics/justice-and-law/compensation-services

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department has made an assessment of the costs associated with attacks on places of worship and their impact upon those affected.

(AQW 1067/17-22)

Mrs Long: I recognise the effect that an attack on a place of worship can have in terms of the distress it causes to members of a faith community and the disruption that resulting damage can have. No economic assessment has been made.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department intends to introduce a places of worship protective funding scheme.

(AQW 1120/17-22)

Mrs Long: My officials are currently exploring evidence based information in relation to attacks on places of worship, in liaison with the PSNI, as well as criteria for the Places of Worship Security Fund that operates in England and Wales to assess if any similar scheme for Northern Ireland is required. I will consider this further once I have had the opportunity to reflect on the findings.

Department for the Economy

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has a vision for an all-Ireland economy.

(AQW 406/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): It is important that Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland continue to co-operate on areas of mutual economic interest and strong links already exist in areas such as agri-food chains. However, Northern Ireland will remain in the UK internal market and UK customs territory and I have no plans for an all-Ireland economy.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) what measures are in place; and (ii) what work has been implemented to tackle loneliness.

(AQW 413/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am very aware of the importance of providing support for people who experience loneliness, which can have a serious impact on an individual's health and well-being.

The remit of the Department for the Economy relates to developing and supporting the Northern Ireland economy. The Department does not therefore deliver any programmes of initiatives aimed at addressing loneliness. However, I am aware that the Department for Communities is currently preparing a scoping study on loneliness. As loneliness is a cross-cutting issue, input to the study will be sought from other Departments, including my Department.

The Department for the Economy is a significant employer of more than 1,000 staff. As with all Northern Ireland Departments, we have a duty of care to our staff who can avail of support services such as Welfare and Inspire in respect of issues such as loneliness.

This duty of care also applies to the Department's Sponsor Bodies. For example, all Further Education (FE) colleges have a range of pastoral care arrangements and counselling services currently in place to provide students with access to appropriate support with issues such as isolation and loneliness. Through various community engagement and outreach programmes colleges also provide opportunity for participants in FE to socialise, which may help address loneliness.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what invest to save opportunities exist within her Department.

(AQW 487/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has three invest to save opportunities which are currently being proposed but are dependent on additional funding. The first involves a review of the Further Education (FE) Sector delivery model. The second proposal, known as Transform to Deliver, will consider how the FE sector is resourced to support future delivery of skills and in providing support for business and industry. The third proposal is to fund a joint project with the Department of Education known as Transition of Young People into Careers.

My Department is also leading the Energy Management Strategy for Central Government, which has set an ambitious target of lowering net energy consumption by 30% by 2030 across Government (from a 2016/17 baseline year). The Strategy includes a proposal to establish an energy 'invest to save' fund to take forward projects across Government that will reduce energy consumption and cost in existing buildings. The Strategic Investment Board and the Department of Finance are currently working to agree the nature and timing of the proposed fund.

In addition £220 million is being invested in delivery of six new FE College Campuses, this significant investment will yield running cost savings and provide modern, fit for purpose campuses.

My Department will continue to explore opportunities to invest to save.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what policies will be adopted to increase the number of new businesses, given that Northern Ireland has the lowest rate of new businesses of any UK region.

(AQW 511/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Supporting new and existing businesses is one of my key economic priorities and there are a number of policies and interventions currently in place to support new business start-ups and enterprise across Northern Ireland.

Entrepreneurship is reflected as a priority in Invest NI's Business Strategy 2017-2021. The agency has developed a comprehensive Entrepreneurship Action Plan, appointed an Entrepreneurship Ambassador and set-up a new Entrepreneurship Forum to help support local entrepreneurs develop new businesses.

Invest NI also provides a range of financial and practical support for new export focused businesses with high growth potential to start up and accelerate growth. This includes its successful Propel and Accelerator programmes.

Councils are also active in this area supporting the creation of locally focused businesses and social entrepreneurship through the Local Economic Development measure and delivery of the Business Start Programme.

Looking forward, the Northern Ireland Economic Strategy will set out longer term plans for Northern Ireland to be a more enterprising region, creating a support infrastructure to encourage new business development in order to drive economic growth.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy what actions her Department has taken to promote tourism in Lisburn.

(AQW 520/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Tourism Northern Ireland's remit is to promote Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland markets.

It achieves this through fully integrated marketing campaigns targeted at specific market segments, which are based on extensive market research. These campaigns include TV, radio, press, outdoor promotions and digital and social marketing. In addition, all activity is under-pinned by extensive PR and media relations activity.

Tourism Northern Ireland remains committed to continuing the support and promotion of the tourism product and experience in the greater Lisburn area through our marketing campaigns, other promotional materials and our consumer website.

As part of our marketing strategy, we promote Northern Ireland as a destination, highlighting specific attractions and experiences which resonate with our target segments.

Tourism Northern Ireland promoted the greater Lisburn area in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland markets in our Autumn 2019 Campaign and it will be featured again in our Spring 2020 Campaign.

As part of our 2019 campaign activity, we supported the surrounding Lisburn area by promoting experiences such as Hillsborough Castle & Gardens, Hilden Brewery and The Parson's Nose.

These attractions and experiences were showcased in Northern Ireland & the Republic of Ireland including The Irish Independent and The Irish Times press. The wider area also featured throughout our 2019 campaign on our Digital and social channels.

Our International Media visits team hosted journalists within the constituency of Lagan Valley at Hillsborough Castle & Gardens, which was used as a Visitor attraction by our team.

In marketing Northern Ireland overseas, Tourism Ireland focuses on a number of major promotional themes each year, which include iconic attractions such as Hillsborough Castle, the Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum.

Tourism Ireland highlights Northern Ireland including Lisburn across a range of marketing platforms, including TV, radio, print and digital advertising; publicity; co-operative marketing campaigns with air and sea carriers, tour operators and travel agents; and attendance, with local tourism industry partners, at international holiday fairs and promotions.

The Lisburn area features throughout Tourism Ireland's global marketing activity including Hillsborough Castle featuring in the Fill Your Heart with Ireland global advertising campaign of TV, cinema and online ads.

Tourism Ireland, working with Tourism Northern Ireland, ensures that the itineraries for invited tour operators and travel writers from around the world includes local attractions such as Hillsborough Castle and Gardens and in future the new Linen Mills Game of Thrones Studio Tours opening in Autumn 2020.

In November 2019, Historic Palaces (Hillsborough) was among the attractions attending 'Ireland Meets the West End' in London. This annual Business to Business event organised by Tourism Ireland, in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland, saw the buyers meet and do business with some 27 tourism businesses from across the island of Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy what (i) short; and (ii) long-term action her Department is planning in response to the recommendations in the Alison Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship.

(AQW 596/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship was commissioned by HM Treasury in 2019 and makes a number of recommendations for the UK government to take action to promote female entrepreneurship. While the report is clearly at a UK level and not directed specifically at Northern Ireland, my Department is considering how best to address the issues raised by the Review.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has any plans to review the Graduating to Success Strategy, which comes to an end in June 2020; and what plans are in place to develop a new strategy.
(AQW 633/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Graduating to Success strategy will close on 31 March 2020. The Department will then carry out a review on the strategy.

The Department is presently developing a Skills Strategy which will set the overall direction for skills in Northern Ireland to 2030 and will inform policy, strategy and investment decisions across the education and skills landscape.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for the Economy to outline when her Department will open a scheme aimed at assisting the food processing sector.

(AQW 669/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Small and medium enterprises within the food processing sector are presently able to apply to Invest NI for support. The Department, along with Invest NI, is currently exploring options to offer support to larger agri- food processors.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what actions her Department is taking to increase banking services in rural areas of West Tyrone.

(AQW 681/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I appreciate the impact that rural banking services can have on local communities, business and investment in rural areas such as west Tyrone.

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, is a member of LINK's Financial Inclusion Programme. This programme works to provide free to use cash machines in rural and deprived areas of the UK. Currently, as part of this, LINK are assessing six sites in County Tyrone potentially to convert existing pay to use cash machines to free to use cash machines.

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, including Post Offices, cash machines, credit unions and other banks. This includes a specific map for the Castlederg area. The website also offers a comparing and switching current account tool.

The Consumer Council is holding one of five Consumer Parliament events in the Strathroy Community Centre in Omagh on 17 February 2020, in which rural consumers from West Tyrone, and surrounding areas, can discuss the banking services they receive.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will address the issue of period poverty for students by making sanitary products freely available in further and higher education institutions.

(AQW 736/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The six Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland provide access to free sanitary products within thirty of their campuses and plan to extend this service to the remaining three sites in early 2020.

In relation to the higher education institutions, Queen's University, Ulster University and St Mary's University College Students' Unions, in partnership with the universities, have provisions in place for free sanitary products in their student union premises.

Officials from my Department are working with a number of other NI Executive Departments, as well as the devolved administrations, to seek a coordinated approach to addressing period poverty.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how her Department intends to maximise the tourism potential of the centenary of the establishment of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 806/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021 will be a landmark event and one which will have great political, historical, community and cultural significance.

The centenary presents an opportunity to celebrate all that is good about Northern Ireland's diverse culture, heritage and landscapes.

I have asked my officials to work with Tourism NI to identify options as to how we might use the milestone potential of the centenary to maximise the visitor numbers coming to Northern Ireland in 2021.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy what consideration her Department has given to the health risks associated with the introduction of 5G technology.

(AQW 965/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While I am aware that perceived health risks around mobile telecommunications infrastructure have been raised, my Department takes its lead from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), as this is a reserved policy matter.

DCMS is advised by Public Health England (PHE) on any potential impact of mobile network technologies.

Additionally, in Northern Ireland, the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency have a memorandum of understanding with PHE which includes arrangements for the provision of specialist technical advice on a range of matters, including radio frequency electro-magnetic fields (RF EMF).

Public Health England advice on this matter is available at this link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mobile-phone-base-stations-radio-waves-and-health#history>

with additional advice regarding 5G technologies at this link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/5g-technologies-radio-waves-and-health>

Current advice from the UK government is that, while a small increase in overall exposure to radio waves is possible when 5G is added to the existing network, the overall exposure is expected to remain low.

DCMS has indicated that a considerable amount of research has been carried out on radio waves and no negative effects on public health are anticipated.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy when she will publish the findings and recommendations of the (i) Cornwall Review Report; and (ii) Buglass Review Report.

(AQW 1428/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Both pieces of work are ongoing. The Department will communicate the outcome of each following their conclusion.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Lyttle asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the delivery of a youth assembly.

(AQW 602/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): I am aware that you asked a question about the development of a youth assembly in June 2015 (AQW 47650/11-15). In its response to your question the Commission's responded that, due to financial constraints, the Assembly had been unable to proceed with plans to establish a Youth Assembly. Consequently, rather than rehearse the full history prior to 2015, I thought it might be most helpful to bring you up to date on more recent developments.

Following the Assembly elections in 2017, the Assembly Commission's immediate priorities were around issues arising from the wider political situation. However, the Commission did pursue a range of other activities to progress engagement with young people. For example, Speaker Newton presided over a Northern Ireland Youth Forum debate in the Chamber in February 2018. In 2019 Speaker Newton held a day-long event, including a debate in the Chamber, for young women aged between 16 and 18 to mark International Women's Day.

Following the Youth Forum event in February 2018, Speaker Newton asked that an item be placed on the agenda for the Commission's next meeting to consider the potential for addressing the issue of a youth assembly. The Commission duly discussed the matter on 5 March 2018 and decided that officials should prepare an options paper in relation to a youth assembly.

Officials duly undertook that work, which included discussions with more than 20 local stakeholder groups, as well as colleagues from other jurisdictions with experience of developing and operating representative youth bodies. In addition, considerable engagement was undertaken with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma, and all of those discussions helped inform and shape the options paper, which was presented to the Commission's meeting on 24 June 2019.

After consideration, the Commission's preferred option was for a Commission-supported model of a youth assembly and that this should make clear the independence of the youth assembly in setting its own agenda. The Commission asked that a more detailed paper be produced to develop that option.

Further discussions with stakeholder groups have been held and the Children's Commissioner has again been central to informing that paper, which, I am advised, is nearing completion and I am hopeful that it will be ready for consideration at one of the new Commission's early meetings. Further engagement with young people, the Commissioner and other key stakeholders will take place following this to create a final shape for the youth assembly model.

I hope you find the above information helpful.

Mr Stalford asked the Assembly Commission whether it plans to follow the example of Westminster and provide childcare services in Parliament Buildings, or elsewhere on the estate; and, if so, when it anticipates the introduction of these services. **(AQW 805/17-22)**

Mrs D Kelly (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): At its meeting on 5 November 2019, the Assembly Commission was advised that the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance, Sue Gray had been liaising with the Clerk/Chief Executive to begin to explore the feasibility of opening a pre-school childcare facility on the Stormont Estate for use by Members, Members' staff, Secretariat staff and Northern Ireland Civil Service staff working on the Estate.

Discussions with the Department of Finance on childcare provision on the Stormont Estate are at a very early stage and considerable work still needs to be done to explore the feasibility and business case for such a project. Any proposal that comes from that work will be brought to the Assembly Commission for consideration. It is intended that a paper setting out the support that is currently available for Members with young children/families will be tabled for information, at the first meeting of the new Assembly Commission.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Saturday 11 January 2020

The Assembly met at 1.03pm, the Acting Speaker in the Chair.

1. Speaker's Business

Members Resignations and Appointments

- 1.1 The Acting Speaker informed Members that Mr Colum Eastwood, Dr Stephen Farry, Ms Claire Hanna and Ms Carla Lockhart ceased to be Members of the Assembly on 13 December 2019. The Chief Electoral Officer was notified in accordance with Section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 1.2 The Acting Speaker informed Members of notification from the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Sinead McLaughlin had been returned as a Member for Foyle constituency, Mr Andrew Muir had been returned as a Member for North Down constituency, Mr Matthew O'Toole had been returned as a Member for South Belfast constituency and Mrs Diane Dodds had been returned as a Member for Upper Bann constituency.

The returned Members gave the Undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered their designations in the presence of the Speaker and Clerk / Chief Executive on the following dates:

*Mr Andrew Muir – 23 December 2019
Mrs Diane Dodds – 9 January 2020
Ms Sinead McLaughlin – 10 January 2020*

- 1.3 The Acting Speaker informed Members that Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleor and Ms Megan Fearon resigned as Members of the Assembly with effect from the end of 6 January 2020, and that Mrs Máire Hendron resigned as a Member of the Assembly with effect from 8 January 2020. The Chief Electoral Officer was notified in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 1.4 The Acting Speaker informed Members of notification from the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Deirdre Hargey had been returned as a Member of the Assembly for South Belfast, that Ms Liz Kimmins had been returned as a Member for Newry and Armagh and that Mrs Naomi Long had been returned as a Member of the Assembly for East Belfast.

The returned Members gave the Undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered their designations in the presence of the Speaker and Clerk / Chief Executive on the following dates:

*Ms Deirdre Hargey – 9 January 2020
Ms Liz Kimmins - 9 January 2020
Mrs Naomi Long - 9 January 2020*

2. Election of Speaker

The Acting Speaker outlined the procedure for the election of a Speaker under Standing Order 4.

Mrs Michelle O'Neill nominated Mr Alex Maskey as a candidate for the Office of Speaker and Mr Conor Murphy seconded the nomination.

Dr Steve Aiken nominated Mr Roy Beggs as a candidate for the Office of Speaker and Mr Robin Swann seconded the nomination.

Ms Nichola Mallon nominated Mr Patsy McGlone as a candidate for the Office of Speaker and Mrs Dolores Kelly seconded the nomination.

Mr Maskey indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

Mr Beggs indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

Mr McGlone indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

Debate ensued.

The Question being put that Mr Alex Maskey be Speaker of the Assembly, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support (Division).

The Speaker (Mr Alex Maskey) took the Chair.

3. Election of Deputy Speakers

The Speaker advised that the procedure for election of Deputy Speakers would be the same as that for the election of the Speaker.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster nominated Mr Christopher Stalford as Deputy Speaker.

Mr Gordon Lyons seconded the nomination. Mr Stalford indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

Dr Steve Aiken nominated Mr Roy Beggs as Deputy Speaker.

Mr Robbie Butler seconded the nomination. Mr Beggs indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

Ms Nichola Mallon nominated Mr Patsy McGlone as Deputy Speaker.

Ms Sinead Bradley seconded the nomination. Mr McGlone indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

Debate ensued.

The Question being put that Mr Christopher Stalford be Deputy Speaker, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

The Question being put that Mr Roy Beggs be Deputy Speaker, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

The Question being put that Mr Patsy McGlone be Deputy Speaker, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Motion – Business Committee Motion

Proposed:

That the following shall be appointed to be Members of the Business Committee:

The Speaker (ex officio);

Ms Kellie Armstrong;

Ms Clare Bailey;

Mr Robbie Butler;

Mrs Dolores Kelly;

Mr Gordon Lyons;

Mr Declan McAleer;

Mr Colin McGrath;

Mr Andrew Muir;

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín;

Mr George Robinson; and

Mr John Stewart.

The Speaker

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Appointment of First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Speaker outlined the procedure for the appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as set out in section 16A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44(1).

Mr Gordon Lyons nominated the Rt. Hon Arlene Foster as First Minister.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster confirmed that she was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office contained in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Conor Murphy nominated Mrs Michelle O'Neill as deputy First Minister.

Mrs Michelle O'Neill confirmed that she was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office contained in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Speaker confirmed that the Rt. Hon Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill had taken up office as First Minister and deputy First Minister respectively.

Members made remarks on the appointments

The sitting was suspended at 2.33pm.

The sitting resumed at 3.05pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

6. Appointment of Junior Ministers

The Speaker informed the Assembly that he had received correspondence from the First Minister and deputy First Minister informing him of their intention to appoint today Mr Gordon Lyons MLA and Mr Declan Kearney MLA as junior Ministers in the Executive Office.

Mr Gordon Lyons confirmed that he was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Gordon Lyons as junior Minister.

Mr Declan Kearney confirmed that he was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Declan Kearney as junior Minister.

7. Filling of the Office of Minister of Justice

The Speaker outlined the process for filling the office of the Minister for Justice.

Ms Kellie Armstrong nominated Mrs Naomi Long to be Minister of Justice.

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Nomination was approved with parallel consent.

Mrs Naomi Long affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed that Mrs Naomi Long had taken up office as Minister of Justice.

8. Appointment of Ministers

The Speaker outlined the process for the appointment of Ministers.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mrs Diane Dodds to be Minister for the Economy.

Mrs Diane Dodds confirmed that she was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mrs Diane Dodds as Minister for the Economy.

Mrs Michelle O'Neill, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Conor Murphy to be Minister of Finance.

Mr Conor Murphy confirmed that he was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Conor Murphy as Minister of Finance.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Peter Weir to be Minister of Education.

Mr Peter Weir confirmed that he was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Peter Weir as Minister of Education.

Mrs Michelle O'Neill, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Ms Deirdre Hargey to be Minister for Communities.

Ms Deirdre Hargey confirmed that she was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Deirdre Hargey as Minister for Communities.

Mrs Dolores Kelly, the nominating officer for the Social Democratic and Labour Party, nominated Ms Nichola Mallon to be Minister for Infrastructure.

Ms Nichola Mallon confirmed that she was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Nichola Mallon as Minister for Infrastructure.

Dr Steve Aiken, the nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party, nominated Mr Robin Swann to be Minister of Health.

Mr Robin Swann confirmed that he was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Robin Swann as Minister of Health.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Edwin Poots to be Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr Edwin Poots confirmed that he was willing to take up the office and affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Edwin Poots as Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

9. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.26pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

11 January 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

11 January 2020

Division

Question put, That Mr Alex Maskey be Speaker of the Assembly.

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 51

Noes: 32

AYES

Nationalist

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 McCartney, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr Maskey, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Unionist

Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan, Mr McCartney.

NOES

Nationalist

Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr O'Toole.

Unionist

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Wells.

Other

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Butler, Mr Chambers.

Total Votes	83	Total Ayes	51	[61.4%]
Nationalist Votes	39	Nationalist Ayes	27	[69.2%]
Unionist Votes	37	Unionist Ayes	24	[64.9%]
Other Votes	7	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Ms Bailey, Miss Woods

The motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 22 October 2019 – 11 January 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

UK Anti-Doping Ltd. Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 (UK Anti-Doping Ltd.)

Review of the Northern Ireland Carrier Bag Levy (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner Strategic Plan 2019-2021 (Department of Justice)

Tourism Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Department for the Economy)

Tourism Ireland Annual Report 2018 (Department for the Economy)

Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals, Northern Ireland 2018 (Department of Health)

Department for Communities Annual Report 2018-2019: Welfare Supplementary Payments; Discretionary Support; Standards of Advice and Assistance; and Sanctions, October 2019 (Department for Communities)

Land and Property Services Trust Statement – Rate Levy Accruals Account Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Land and Property Services)

Waterways Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2018 (Waterways Ireland)

Child Maintenance Service Annual Report on Decision Making 1 April 2018- 31 March 2019 (Department for Communities)

Registrar General Northern Ireland Annual Report 2018 (Department of Finance)

The Sports Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2017 (Department for Communities)

The Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Department for Communities)

The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Department for Communities)

Libraries NI Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19 (Department for Communities)

Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 – Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards Code of Practice, November 2019 (Department of Health)

Annual Report of the Lay Observer for Northern Ireland 2018/19 (Department of Finance)

The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Annual Report 2018-2019 (Department of Health)

Special EU Programmes Body Annual Report and Accounts 2018 (Department of Finance)

InterTradeIreland Annual Report and Accounts 2018 (Department for the Economy)

Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report 1 April 2018 - 31 March 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Strategic Investment Board Limited Annual Review and Financial Statements 2018-19 (The Executive Office)

Belfast Metropolitan College Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2019 (Department for the Economy)

Northern Regional College Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2019 (Department for the Economy)

North West Regional College Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2019 (Department for the Economy)

South Eastern Regional College Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2019 (Department for the Economy)

Southern Regional College Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2019 (Department for the Economy)

South West College Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2019 (Department for the Economy)

Major Capital Projects (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

Victims and Survivors Service Limited Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Victims and Survivors Service)

The Commission for Victims and Survivors Annual Report & Accounts 2018/19 (The Executive Office)

Department for Communities Annual Report on Decision Making And Financial Accuracy 1 January to 31 December 2018 (Department for Communities)

Northern Ireland Police Fund - Annual Report & Accounts 2018-19 (Northern Ireland Police Fund)

Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute Annual Report and Accounts 2018-2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation Annual Report and Accounts 2018/19 (The Executive Office)

Memorandum of Understanding between DAERA and DFI with Regard to Drinking Water Quality (Department for Infrastructure)

Food Safety Promotion Board – Safefood Annual Report 2018 (Department of Health)

Loughs Agency Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 December 2018 (Loughs Agency)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2019/204 The Social Security (Industrial Injuries) (Prescribed Diseases) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Communities)

SR 2019/205 The Employer's Liability (Compulsory Insurance) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2019/206 The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Communities)

SR 2019/207 The Misuse of Drugs (Designation) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Health)

SR 2019/208 The Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Health)

SR 2019/210 The Eggs and Chicks and Poultrymeat (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Communities)

SR 2019/199 The Mental Capacity (Deprivation of Liberty) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Health)

SR 2019/200 The Mental Capacity (Money and Valuables) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Health)

SR 2019/209 The Waterways (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)

- SR 2019/213 The Social Security (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Communities)
- SR 2019/214 The Rehabilitation of Offenders (Exceptions) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Justice)
- SR 2019/215 The Occupational Pensions (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Communities)
- SR 2019/218 The Official Feed and Food Controls (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Health)
- SR 2019/219 The Meat (Official Controls Charges) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Health)
- SR 2019/220 The Fishery Products (Official Controls Charges) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Health)
- SR 2019/221 The Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Communities)
- SR 2019/222 The Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Communities)
- SR 2019/ 223 The Genetically Modified Organisms (Deliberate Release) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
- SR 2019/227 The Official Controls (Animals, Feed and Food) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
- SR 2019/228 The U7200 Ballygowan Road, Dromore (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)
- SR 2019/229 The Tarry Lane, Lurgan (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)
- SR 2019/230 The Plant Health (Official Controls and Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
- SR 2019/232 The Mental Capacity (Deprivation of Liberty) (No.2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Health)
- SR 2019/233 The Crown Court (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Justice)
- SR 2019/234 The County Court (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Justice)
- SR 2019/235 The Family Proceedings (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Justice)
- SR 2019/237 The Rules of the Court of Judicature (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) 2019 (Department of Justice)
- SR 2019/238 The Magistrates' Courts (Miscellaneous Amendments) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Justice)
- SR 2019/240 The Waste Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
- SR 2019/239 The Galway Drive, Belfast (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)
- SR 2020/02 The Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment Tribunal (Early Conciliation: Exemptions and Rules of Procedure) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)
- SR 2020/03 The Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment Tribunal (Constitution and Rules of Procedure) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)
- SR 2020/04 The Industrial Tribunals (1996 Order) (Application of Conciliation Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)
- SR 2020/05 The Rates (Making and Levying of Different Rates) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)
- SR 2020/06 The State Pension Debits and Credits (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/07 The State Pension Revaluation for transitional Pensions Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/08 The Agriculture (Student fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/09 The Police Pensions (Additional Voluntary Contributions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Justice)

SR 2020/10 The Judicial Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Justice)

For Information Only

SR 2019/211 The Social Security (Iceland) (Liechtenstein) (Norway) (Citizens' Rights Agreement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Communities)

SR 2019/212 The Social Security (Switzerland) (Citizens' Rights Agreement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Communities)

SR 2019/216 The Parking Places (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment No. 4) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2019/217 The Roads (Speed Limit) (No. 3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2019/224 The Parking Places (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment No. 5) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2019/225 The Ballysillan Park, Belfast (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2019/226 The Ferrard Meadow, Antrim (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2019/231 The One-Way Traffic (Coalisland) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/01 (C.1) The Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (Commencement No. 3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

Department of Transport's Consultation on the Introduction of Green Number Plates for Ultra-low Emission Vehicles (Department for Infrastructure)

Draft Social and Environmental Guidance for Water and Sewerage Services (2021-27) (Department for Infrastructure)

2021 Census: Topic Consultation for Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency)

2021 Census: Output Strategy Consultation for Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency)

9. Departmental Publications

Correction slip – Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner Strategic Plan 2019-2021 (first laid 17 October 2019) (Department of Justice)

Correction slip – SR 2019/194 – The Passenger Goods Vehicles (Tacographs) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department for Infrastructure)

2021 Census Northern Ireland Proposals, April 2019 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency)

2021 Census Proposal Information Event Presentation (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency)

Northern Ireland Screen Commission Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Department for the Economy)

Department of Finance Minute 14th November 2019 under section 8(1) of the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, directing that accruing resources may be used for certain purposes for the year ending 31 March 2020 (Department of Finance)

The Safety of Prisoners Held by the Northern Ireland Prison Service – A joint inspection by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland)

10. Agency Publications

Prison Service Pay Review Body Eleventh Report on Northern Ireland 2019 (Northern Ireland Prison Service)

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 14 January 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

The Speaker informed the House that Mr Matthew O'Toole gave the undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered his designation in the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive before the sitting on Saturday 11 January.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 14 January 2020.

Mr Gordon Lyons

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

*The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support.*

3.2 Motion - Establishment of Statutory Committees

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Orders 46 and 47, this Assembly determines that 9 Statutory Committees shall be established, as follows:

- the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs;
- the Committee for Communities;
- the Committee for the Economy;
- the Committee for Education;
- the Committee for the Executive Office;
- the Committee for the Environment;
- the Committee for Finance;
- the Committee for Health;
- the Committee for Infrastructure; and
- the Committee for Justice.

Terms of reference, quorum and composition of the Committees shall be as prescribed in Standing Orders 48 and 49.

Mr Gordon Lyons
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Robbie Butler
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the Motion was carried without division.

3.3 Appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Statutory Committees

The Speaker outlined the procedure for the appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Statutory Committees.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Paul Givan to be Chairperson of the Committee for Justice. Mr Paul Givan indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Paul Givan as Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

Mr John O'Dowd, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Dr Caoimhe Archibald to be Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy. Dr Caoimhe Archibald indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Dr Caoimhe Archibald as Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Ms Paula Bradley to be Chairperson of the Committee for Communities. Ms Paula Bradley indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Paula Bradley as Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.

Mr John O'Dowd, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Colm Gildernew to be Chairperson of the Committee for the Health. Mr Colm Gildernew indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Colm Gildernew as Chairperson of the Committee for Health.

Mrs Dolores Kelly, the nominating officer for the Social Democratic and Labour Party, nominated Mr Colin McGrath to be Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office. Mr Colin McGrath indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Colin McGrath as Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.

Mr Robbie Butler, the acting nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party, nominated Dr Steve Aiken to be Chairperson of the Committee for Finance. Dr Steve Aiken indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Dr Steve Aiken as Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Miss Michelle McIlveen to be Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure. Miss Michelle McIlveen indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Miss Michelle McIlveen as Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.

Mr John O'Dowd, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Declan McAleer to be Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Mr Declan McAleer indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Declan McAleer as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Ms Kellie Armstrong, the nominating officer for the Alliance Party, nominated Mr Chris Lyttle to be Chairperson of the Committee for Education. Mr Chris Lyttle indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Chris Lyttle as Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Paul Frew to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance. Mr Paul Frew indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Paul Frew as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.

Mr John O'Dowd, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Ms Linda Dillon to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice. Ms Linda Dillon indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Linda Dillon as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

Mrs Dolores Kelly, the nominating officer for the Social Democratic and Labour Party, nominated Ms Sinead McLaughlin to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy. Ms Sinead McLaughlin indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Sinead McLaughlin as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Gary Middleton to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health. Mr Gary Middleton indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Gary Middleton as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health.

Mr John O'Dowd, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Ms Karen Mullan to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education. Ms Karen Mullan indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Karen Mullan as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Robbie Butler, the acting nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party, nominated Mr Mike Nesbitt to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office. Mr Mike Nesbitt indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Mike Nesbitt as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Executive Office.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr David Hilditch to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure. Mr David Hilditch indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr David Hilditch as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.

John O'Dowd, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Philip McGuigan to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Mr Philip McGuigan indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Philip McGuigan as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Ms Kellie Armstrong, the nominating officer for the Alliance Party, nominated herself to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities. Ms Kellie Armstrong indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Kellie Armstrong as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.

3.4 Appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Standing Committees

The Speaker outlined the procedure for the appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Standing Committees.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr William Humphrey to be Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee. Mr William Humphrey indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr William Humphrey as Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr John O'Dowd, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Ms Sinéad Ennis to be Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Ms Sinéad Ennis indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Sinéad Ennis as Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Mervyn Storey to be Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. The Speaker informed the House that he had received correspondence from Mr Mervyn Storey indicating his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Mervyn Storey as Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr John O'Dowd, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Ms Carál Ní Chuilín to be Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures. Ms Carál Ní Chuilín indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Carál Ní Chuilín as Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Mrs Dolores Kelly, the nominating officer for the Social Democratic and Labour Party, nominated Mr Daniel McCrossan to be Chairperson of the Audit Committee. Mr Daniel McCrossan indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Daniel McCrossan as Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Dr Steve Aiken, the nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party, nominated Mr Roy Beggs to be Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee. Mr Roy Beggs indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Roy Beggs as Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr William Irwin to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Mr William Irwin indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr William Irwin as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr John O'Dowd, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Maolíosa McHugh to be Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Mr Maolíosa McHugh indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Maolíosa McHugh as Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Ms Kellie Armstrong, the nominating officer for the Alliance Party, nominated Mr Andrew Muir to be Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee. Mr Andrew Muir indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Andrew Muir as Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Tom Buchanan to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures. Mr Tom Buchanan indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Tom Buchanan as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

3.5 Suspension of Standing Order 79(2)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 79(2) be suspended for 14 January 2020.

Mr Gordon Lyons

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

3.6 Motion – Appointments to the Assembly Commission

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79, the following shall be appointed to be Members of the Assembly Commission:

The Speaker (ex officio)

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Mr Robbie Butler

Mrs Pam Cameron

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr John O'Dowd

Mr Gordon Lyons

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

4. Election of Principal Deputy Speaker

The Speaker outlined the procedure for the election of a Principal Deputy Speaker under Standing Order 5(A).

Mr Gordon Lyons nominated Mr Christopher Stalford as a candidate for the position of Principal Deputy Speaker of the Assembly. Mr Stalford indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

Debate ensued.

The Question was put, that Mr Christopher Stalford be Principal Deputy Speaker of the Assembly and the Assembly divided.

Due to a technical issue in the Division lobby the result of the vote was deferred until later in the sitting.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Statement – School Enhancement Programme

The Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, made a statement regarding the School Enhancement Programme, following which he replied to questions.

5.2 Statement – Resolution of HSC Agenda for Change Staff Dispute

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, made a statement regarding the Resolution of HSC Agenda for Change Staff Dispute, following which he replied to questions.

6. Election of Principal Deputy Speaker (cont'd)

The Speaker informed the House that the technical issue in the Division lobby had been resolved and announced the result of the division.

The Question being put, that Mr Christopher Stalford, be Principal Deputy Speaker of the Assembly, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support (Division).

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 1.40pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

14 January 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

14 January 2020

Division

The Question being put, that Mr Christopher Stalford, be Principal Deputy Speaker of the Assembly.

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 49

Noes: 31

AYES

Nationalist

Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Unionist

Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, 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 Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr M Bradley, Mr Robinson.

NOES

Nationalist

Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon.

Unionist

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden.

Other

Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bradshaw, Ms McLaughlin.

Total Votes	80	Total Ayes	49	[61.3%]
Nationalist Votes	36	Nationalist Ayes	25	[69.4%]
Unionist Votes	35	Unionist Ayes	24	[68.6%]
Other Votes	9	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

The motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 12 January 2020 – 14 January 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
5. Assembly Reports

Report to the Assembly on Proposed Extension of Current Member Contribution Rates for the Judicial Pensions Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (Department of Justice)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/10 The Judicial Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Justice)

SR 2020/11 The County Court (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Justice)

SR 2020/12 The Seafarers (Collective Redundancies, Information and Consultation and Insolvency Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Economy)

SR 2020/13 The Police Service of Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (Department of Justice)

For Information Only

7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 20 January 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Assembly Commission

The Speaker informed the House that, as required by Standing Order 79(4) and in accordance with Standing Order 79(5), two vacancies exist on the Assembly Commission that must be filled within 28 days.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 20 January 2020.

Mr Gordon Lyons

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

*The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support.*

3.2 Motion - Business Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Keith Buchanan replace Mr Gordon Lyons as a member of the Business Committee.

Mr Gordon Lyons

Mr George Robinson

*The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.*

3.3 Motion - Business Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr John O'Dowd and Ms Sinéad Ennis replace Ms Carál Ní Chuilín and Mr Declan McAleer as members of the Business Committee.

Mr Carál Ní Chuilín

Mr Declan McAleer

*The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.*

3.4 Suspension of Standing Order 49(2)(a) and Standing Order 52(2)(a)**Proposed:**

That Standing Order 49(2)(a) and Standing Order 52(2)(a) be suspended.

*Mr Gordon Lyons
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Robbie Butler
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Clare Bailey*

*The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support.*

3.5 Membership of Statutory Committees**Proposed:**

That, in accordance with Standing Order 49(3), the membership of the Statutory Committees as detailed in NIA 5/17-22 be approved.

*Mr Gordon Lyons
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Robbie Butler
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Clare Bailey*

*The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.*

3.6 Membership of Standing Committees**Proposed:**

That, in accordance with Standing Order 52(3), the membership of the Standing Committees as detailed in NIA 6/17-22 be approved.

*Mr Gordon Lyons
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Robbie Butler
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Clare Bailey*

*The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.*

4. Executive Committee Business**4.1 Motion: European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill 2019-20****Proposed:**

That the Assembly notes the request from the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union for the consent of the Assembly for the provisions of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill which affect its competence; and affirms that the Assembly does not agree to give its consent.

The Executive Office

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.18pm and resumed at 12.29pm.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion to Delay

Proposed:

That this Assembly, in accordance with Standing Order 16, adjourns the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill 2019-20 for seven days.

Mr Jim Allister

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion **fell** (Division 1).

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 Motion: European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill 2019-20 (cont'd)

Debate resumed on the motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.00pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

20 January 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

20 January 2020

Division 1

Motion: Motion to Delay

Proposed:

That this Assembly, in accordance with Standing Order 16, adjourns the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill 2019-20 for seven days.

Mr Jim Allister

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 14

Noes: 62

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Allister, Ms Sugden.

NOES

Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mr Catney, Mr Clarke, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Mr Givan, Ms Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Ennis, Mr Robinson.

The motion **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 15 January 2020 – 20 January 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
 - Arts Council of Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 March 2019 (Department for Communities)
 - Armagh Observatory and Planetarium Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Department for Communities)
 - Special Adviser Codes (Department of Finance)
5. Assembly Reports
 - Membership of Statutory Committees (NIA 5/17-22)
 - Membership of Standing Committees (NIA 6/17-22)
6. Statutory Rules
7. Written Ministerial Statements
 - Minister of Finance – Special Adviser Appointments
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
 - Historic Monuments Council for Northern Ireland: 3rd Report 2012-2019 (Department for Communities)
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 27 January 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

- 2.1 The Principal Deputy Speaker informed the Assembly of the passing of the former deputy First Minister, Mr Séamus Mallon, and that the Business Committee had agreed as a mark of respect to suspend the sitting until 4.30pm. On resumption of the sitting Members would have an opportunity to pay their respects to Mr Mallon and to sign a book of condolence.
- 2.2 The Principal Deputy Speaker informed the Assembly that the business scheduled for today in the revised Order Paper would commence at 6.00pm and that the rescheduling required a formal item of business to be taken prior to suspension.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 27 January 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 sitting was suspended at 12.03pm.

The sitting resumed at 4.32pm, the Speaker in the Chair.

4. Assembly Business

Tributes to former deputy First Minister Séamus Mallon

The Speaker announced the death of the former deputy First Minister Mr Séamus Mallon.

Members paid tribute to Mr Mallon.

The sitting was suspended at 5.28pm.

The sitting resumed at 6.10pm, the Speaker in the Chair.

5. Speaker's Business

- 5.1** The Speaker informed the Assembly that he had been notified by the nominating officer of the Democratic Unionist Party that Mrs Pam Cameron has replaced Mr Gary Middleton as Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee and that he was satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders had been met. The appointment took effect on 17 January 2020.

6. Assembly Business

6.1 Motion: Appointment to the Assembly Commission

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Mr John Blair be appointed to fill a vacancy on the Assembly Commission.

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Mr Andrew Muir

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

6.2 Motion: Appointment to the Assembly Commission

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Mr Keith Buchanan be appointed to fill a vacancy on the Assembly Commission.

Mr Gary Middleton

Mr George Robinson

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

6.3 Extension of Sitting on Monday 27 January 2020 under Standing Order 10(3A)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 27 January 2020 be extended to no later than 9pm.

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.

7. Executive Committee Business

7.1 Statement – Public Expenditure: 2019-2020 January Monitoring Round

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, made a statement regarding the Public Expenditure 2019-2020 January Monitoring Round, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

7.2 Legislative Consent Motion: Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill**Proposed:**

That this Assembly, noting the urgency of the issue resulting from the absence of legal powers needed to continue making Direct Payments to NI farmers in the 2020 scheme year, agrees that the provisions in the Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill, as introduced into the House of Commons on 9 January 2020, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried**.

8. Adjournment**Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.24pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

27 January 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on

21 January 2020 – 27 January 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
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
SR 2020/15 The Transfer of Undertakings and Service Provision Change (Protection of Employment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy).
7. Written Ministerial Statements
Minister of Health - Response to the Emergence of Coronavirus (2019 NCoV).
Minister for Infrastructure – MOT Temporary Exemption Certificates.
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Bill, Legislative Consent Memorandum (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).
Police Service of Northern Ireland 5 Year Service Medal (Department of Justice).
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 3 February 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Private Members' Bills

The Speaker outlined the procedures, protocols and timescales associated with the process that will enable Members' to bring forward legislation in the form of a Bill during this mandate of the Assembly.

3. Matter of the Day

3.1 EU Withdrawal

Mr John O'Dowd made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union on 31 January 2020. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Motion: Nomination of the Acting Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

Proposed:

That this Assembly, in accordance with paragraph 12(2) of Schedule 1 to the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, nominates Paul McFadden for appointment as the Acting Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

*Mr John Blair
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr John O'Dowd*

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 First Stage: Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Mr Jim Allister introduced a Bill to amend sections 7 and 8 of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 and article 3 of the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in relation to special advisers in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, repeal the Civil Service Commissioners (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016, amend section 17 of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and to make additional provision for the functioning of government in Northern Ireland and connected purposes.

The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA 01/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair

5.2 Motion: Autism Training in Schools**Proposed:**

That this Assembly recognises the specific needs of pupils with autism in our schools; values and supports the role of all educators in ensuring pupils with autism have the best educational outcomes; and calls on the Minister of Education to explore the introduction of mandatory autism training for all teachers and classroom assistants.

Mrs Pam Cameron

Mr David Hilditch

Amendment 1**Proposed:**

Leave out all after 'Education' and insert:

'to introduce mandatory autism training for all trainee teachers, teachers and classroom assistants.'

Miss Rachel Woods

Mr Chris Lyttle

Amendment 2**Proposed:**

At end insert:

'; and for teacher training colleges to introduce a compulsory module which includes this training during the Postgraduate Graduate Certificate in Education.'

Ms Karen Mullan

Ms Catherine Kelly

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6. Question Time**6.1 The Executive Office**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the First Minister, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone) took the Chair.

6.2 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6.3 Communities

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone) took the Chair.

6.4 Economy

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

7. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

7.1 Motion: Autism Training in Schools (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, Amendment 1 was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

8. Assembly Business

8.1 Extension of Sitting on Monday 3 February 2020 under Standing Order 10(3A)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 3 February 2020 be extended to no later than 9pm.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried**.

9. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

9.1 Motion: Climate Emergency

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises that we are facing climate breakdown and a biodiversity crisis which are impacting here and now, and will affect all aspects of our lives in coming years; declares a climate emergency; and calls upon the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Minister for the Economy to implement urgently the commitments as agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement to include reviewing the Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions in respect of the Paris Accord and the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100; developing a new energy strategy which will set ambitious targets and actions for a fair and just transition to a zero carbon society; bringing forward a climate change act to give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning; establishing an Independent Environmental Protection Agency to oversee this work and ensure targets are met; developing an economic strategy which will support clean and inclusive growth and create jobs as part of a green new deal; creating a plan to eliminate plastic pollution; and closing down the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme and replacing it with a scheme that cuts carbon emissions effectively.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr Philip McGuigan

Mr Declan McAleer

Amendment 1

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'crisis' and insert:

'declares a climate emergency; and calls on the Executive to fulfil the climate action and environmental commitments agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement by commencing, as a matter of urgency, a review of the Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions in respect of the Paris Accord and the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100 and to ensure that targets are met; and further calls upon the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to begin immediately work to establish an Independent Environmental Protection Agency based on models of best practice, that will be appointed within 12 months.'

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Miss Rachel Woods

Amendment 2**Proposed:**

Leave out all after 'years' and insert:

'notes that the New Decade New Approach paper was tabled by HM Government, in conjunction, where relevant, with the Government of the Republic of Ireland and contained within Appendix 2, a possible outline of a Programme for Government which listed a number of potential measures on the subject of climate change but which have not been agreed as a final Programme of Government by the parties within the Executive; and calls on the Executive to use an evidence based approach, to balance the demands of our growing population whilst ensuring the protection of our natural resources for future generations, as they work to construct a final Programme for Government.'

Mr William Irwin

Mr Gary Middleton

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, Amendment 1 was **made** (Division 1).

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

10. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 7.40pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

3 February 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

3 February 2020

Division 1

Climate Emergency (Amendment 1)

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'crisis' and insert:

'declares a climate emergency; and calls on the Executive to fulfil the climate action and environmental commitments agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement by commencing, as a matter of urgency, a review of the Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions in respect of the Paris Accord and the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100 and to ensure that targets are met; and further calls upon the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to begin immediately work to establish an Independent Environmental Protection Agency based on models of best practice, that will be appointed within 12 months.'

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Miss Rachel Woods

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 48

Noes: 27

AYES

Dr Aiken, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald, Miss Woods.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr M Bradley, Mr Robinson.

The Amendment 1 was **made**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 28 January 2020 – 3 February 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
Annual Report on the Social Fund 2018/19 (Department for Communities).
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
SR 2020/16 The Food Safety (Information and Compositional Requirements) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health).
SR 2020/17 The Mental Capacity (Research) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health).
7. Written Ministerial Statements
Minister of Health - Response to the Emergence of Coronavirus (2019 NCoV) – 29 Jan Update.
Minister of Health - Response to the Emergence of Coronavirus (2019 NCoV) – 3 Feb Update.
8. Consultation Documents
Draft Update to Nutritional Standards for School Food January 2020 (Department of Education).
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 at 3 February 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

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 01/17-22)	03/02/20							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 February 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 late Mr Francie Brolly.

The Speaker announced the death of Mr Francie Brolly, a former Member for the East Londonderry constituency.

Members paid tribute to Mr Brolly on behalf of their parties.

2.2 Members Resignations and Appointments

The Speaker informed Members that Mr Raymond McCartney resigned as a Member for the Foyle constituency with effect from 3 February 2020 and that the Chief Electoral Officer was notified in accordance with Section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Speaker informed Members of notification from the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Martina Anderson had been returned as a Member for the Foyle constituency.

Ms Anderson gave the undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered her designation in the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive at 10.30 am on 10 February 2020.

2.3 Speaker's Rulings

The Speaker informed Members that he would be publishing new Speaker's rulings on Matters of the Day and questions for urgent oral answer.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion: Business Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Gary Middleton replace Mr George Robinson as a member of the Business Committee.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr Christopher Stalford

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried**.

3.2 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Alan Chambers replace Mr John Stewart as a member of the Committee for Health; and that Mr John Stewart replace Mr Alan Chambers as a member of the Committee for the Economy.

Mr Robbie Butler

Dr Steve Aiken

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried**.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Motion: The Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Judicial Pensions) (Consequential Provision No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Proposed:

That the Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Judicial Pensions) (Consequential Provision No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Minister for Communities

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion: Abuse of Service Animals

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the invaluable work of service animals used by the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the Prison Service; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to introduce to Northern Ireland a law, equivalent to Finn's Law, making it an offence to harm or abuse an animal in the line of duty.

Mr Alex Easton

Mrs Pam Cameron

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

5.2 Motion: NICE Guidance on Fertility

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the serious emotional distress felt by those experiencing fertility problems in our society; notes that the Department of Health has endorsed the 2013 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Clinical Guideline on Fertility (CG156); commends the efforts of those campaigning for the full implementation of NICE guidance on in vitro fertilisation (IVF); welcomes the commitment within New Decade, New Approach to make three cycles of IVF treatment available on the NHS; and calls on the Minister of Health to implement fully, as a matter of urgency, the NICE guidance on fertility including making three cycles of IVF available as committed to in New Decade, New Approach.

Ms Karen Mullan

Mr Colm Gildernew

Amendment 1**Proposed:**

Insert after 'urgency':

"and with immediate effect for women aged 35 years and up to threshold age of 40,'

Ms Sinead Bradley

Mr Mark Durkan

Amendment 2**Proposed:**

At end insert:

" , and to implement a fertility education and information programme similar to the Scottish Government's Your Future Fertility programme.'

Mrs Pam Cameron

Ms Paula Bradley

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

6.2 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

6.3 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

6.4 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

7. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

7.1 Motion: NICE Guidance on Fertility (cont'd)

Debate resumed on the motion and amendments.

The Question being put, Amendment 1 was **made**.

The Question being put, Amendment 2 was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was **carried**.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.30pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

10 February 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 4 February 2020 – 10 February 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees: Second Report of Session 2019 – 2020 (NIA 8/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules
7. Written Ministerial Statements
The First Minister and deputy First Minister – The Legislative Programme
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

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Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 10 February 2020

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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 01/17-22)	03/02/20							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage